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DANC 461:
Senior Thesis

Melinda M. Ritchie

Loyola Marymount University
Spring 2005

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*Reflection: Summary of Dance
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Melinda Ritchie
DANC 461 - Senior Thesis
Spring Semester, 2005

Loyola Marymount Course Reflections

*****Academic Dance Classes:*****

• DANC 100: Orientation to Dance

• ***Personal Overall Impression:*** Orientation gave me a connection to the dance department and the dance major in general that I remember being extremely thankful for coming in as a rather lost-feeling freshman. I left the class with a feeling of direction, in terms of the purpose of my study as a dancer.

• ***Course Objectives:***

- Students will learn how to use the support resources at Loyola Marymount University.
- Students will learn about resources in the greater Los Angeles area which they may use to amplify their study of dance and to augment their physical training.
- Students will cultivate alert awareness of the body-mind-spirit connection and use that awareness in their preparation to become more knowledgeable and able dancers, more creative artists, more resourceful and informed students and more humane individuals.
- Students will build community with each other.
- Students will consider a wide variety of career options open to those who train to become dancers.

• ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- A relation to myself as a dancer, instead of 'someone who dances.'

DANC 160/161: Fundamentals of Composition I and II

• ***Personal Overall Impression:*** I distinctly recall, while taking this class, being hit with the (at that point mystifying and mind-altering,) realization of what choreography was... that is was more than stringing together pre-existing steps in a new way. I was astounded at the prospect of making up new movement, and using myself as my inspiration. In the syllabus it says "some of the students in this class will discover an unanticipated talent for making dances," and I feel more than anything else, that was my exact journey, (especially the reality the 'unanticipated,' previously choreography was something someone else always did, and never me.)

• ***Course Objectives/Activities:***

- The student will: improvise, compose and perform dance studies, speak, read and write about dance and dancing, build community, and integrate lessons from this course with your life outside this dance studio.
- The student will work in six essential areas of dance: creative process,

aesthetic principles, physical and performance skills, aesthetic valuing, cultural-historical context, integration and community building.

-More specifically the student will: explore movement possibilities, develop aesthetic vocabulary and comprehend basic principles of dance aesthetics – focusing on the elements of dance, attune self to the stages of becoming a creating and performing dancer: awareness, attention, intention, action and reflection; attune self to the stages of becoming an audience member, attune self to beginning an inward journey of becoming an increasing whole and humane human being, connect the lessons from dance to study and life beyond the classroom, and value shared vision and learning community.

• ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- A understanding of choreography as a process and an achievable activity.
- A means of finding, using and producing from inspiration.
- An ability to create unique and new movements, and to shed hesitations in moving my body in ways that were unlike the traditional classed I had taken.
- Owning and presenting movements as my own, with no feelings of embarrassment.
- A comprehension of the first step in creation, and the basis of composing.

• DANC 260: Laban Movement Analysis

• ***Personal Overall Impression :*** Having taken Laban Movement Analysis and talking about dance now, I can not even remember or comprehend how I talked about movement beforehand. The class was revolutionary for me in that respect, and now I feel competent and confident interacting with other dancers and professionals since we share a common academic dance vocabulary.

• ***Course Objectives:***

- To learn the historical and cultural context of LMA.
- To identify several core concepts and principles of LMA.
- To demonstrate an ability to embody the movement concepts of Shape and Effort.
- To develop skills to think critically about movement and the possibilities for multiple interpretations of meaning.
- To develop skills for discovering and articulating personal meaning in movement.

• ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- Being able to express though words and symbols movement in a universal language, as well as key components of Effort and Shape.
- An ability to interpret movement and classify it.
- An ability to be given a directive at match that feeling or quality with correctly classified movements.

DANC 262: Dance Styles and Forms

• **Personal Overall Impression:** Having Scott mix historically influential dancers and dances with learning the process and components of creating a dance gave me a wonderful grasp of the huge strata choreography could cover. This class gave me the meat and devices in composition that I turn to every time I create something. Where fundamentals gave me the creativity, styles and forms gave me the context and means of competently creating a work, more than an expression of my kind of work. Also, I feel like I found a voice to what kind of movement I would classify as my aesthetic.

• **Course Objectives:**

- To review historical contemporary 20th century choreographic aesthetics.
- To promote the recognition and development of multiple approaches to dance composition.
- To promote a deeper understanding and implementation of Laban's Effort Concepts.
- To promote a deeper understanding of music and dance related to dance composition.
- To promote the development of the individual student's personal dance aesthetic.

• **Specific Skills Gained:**

- An ability to create and perform both group and solo dances.
- Recognize and utilize choreographic devices.
- An ability to evaluate choreographic works according to specific content.
- Being able to "perform an expanded dynamic movement range," and having "acquired a diversity of approaches and solutions to dance composition."

DANC 281: History of Dance Theatre

• **Personal Overall Impression:** What was most striking about this class for me was finally getting that commonality that most people shared before me. Like Laban, I finally gained access to a 'members only' club (the club being those who know dance history) that was constantly being referenced all around me. I left class each day with a sigh of relief having gained a little bit more knowledge and understanding of the world I am throwing myself into with this major.

• **Course Objectives:**

- Acquire further understanding of dance development as an art form from its earliest origins.
- Consider how and why we watch dance, as well as, why certain movements occurred throughout the course of dance history.
- To look at the political, social, gendered, anthropological, sexual, technical and historical constructions around and within Western dance so that we are not merely watching dance, but engaging, participating, and understanding it as an informed and conscious audience.

• **Specific Skills Gained:**

- A cultural and historical context to match choreographic styles to eras and influence on the rest of the dance world.

- An increased appreciation of the origins and wave-makers of the dance world.
- Being able to index the 'how's,' 'why's' and 'what's' of dance and apply those to other areas of study within the major.
- Being able to draw on historical figures and their influence in performance and choreography.

DANC 380: Music for Dance

• **Personal Overall Impression:** This class has so far left me with a sense of rhythm I was not aware I possessed. I have been able to pick out beats and cycles of rhythms that I believe previously I would have either missed or would have boggled my mind. I have been able to hear music differently and pick at it with a better ear, count it out better and generally not be so confused. I feel like this class is removing the barrier that I used to feel existed between me and being able to effectively use music in my own work, and to dance to music in other's pieces.

• **Course Objectives:**

- To acquire further understanding of the principles of drumming.
- To challenge and improve the student's ability to learn, analyze and execute rhythmic patterns.
- To further develop musical and rhythmic clarity as well as phrasing.
- To expand the student's knowledge of keeping time, the overall pattern of time, and the many forms of subdividing time.

• **Specific Skills Gained (So Far...):**

- Increased ability to keep time and hold a tempo without irregularities.
- Recognizing rhythms and being able to repeat them back by ear.
- Being able to execute varying hand placements and positions to make different sounds with the drum.
- Becoming more aware of rhythm and being able to apply it to other music as well as drumming.

DANC 381: To Dance is Human

• **Personal Overall Impression:** To dance is Human was a very therapeutic class, not only because of the personal experience and shared community we developed, but also because of the context it placed dance in globally. Becoming aware of how dance played into the lives of everyone – and not just me – made me much more appreciative of the skills I possess and the art form of dance, and the social role of dance. Also, it was healing for me, because for the first time, literally ever, I turned my attention to my culture, and my family, and was overwhelmed by the emotional response I had to the things I discovered about me, and them, and our relationships, that the content of the course steered me towards.

• **Course Objectives:**

- The student will investigate key philosophical, cultural-anthropological, and aesthetic concepts as they pertain to Dance and Dancing.
- The student will develop the fundamental skills and sensibilities necessary when observing and participating in community-centered dance.

- The student will acquire the conceptual knowledge and vocabulary (elements of dance, essential dance history, what is gesture, how does the body work) used when studying dance as a phenomena (rite, ritual, social, entertainment, art, recreation, health.)
- The student will investigate how dance and dancing which is indigenous to one group of people in a particular historical period or geographic region travels to a new era or geographic location.
- The student will observe and perform the dances from a variety of American cultural groups.
- The student will Study storytelling as a phenomena.
- The student will experience and investigate the power of storytelling,
- The student will Exercise the mind, body, and spirit to know self better as a means to become more curious about others and more free and respectful in the pursuit of building community.
- The student will develop and employ "Multiple Intelligences."
- The student will Engage in interdisciplinary study.
- The student will Connect course content and experience with life and living.

• ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- A greater sense of respect for other cultures and the role of relating within that culture, especially that of verbal and dance.
- A better understanding of my own culture and how the people and things in my life have shaped my experience.
- An understanding of what it may have been like to have experienced other cultures in living, and an appreciation of aspects of other cultures by having experienced parts of those cultures.
- A greater appreciation for personal experience within a given context.

DANC 480/481: Kinesiology I and II

• ***Personal Overall Experience:*** I could never say enough about this class. It transformed my mental view of my body as something to work with in dance, instead of working in dance in spite of my body. It also gave me the ability to be able to know my body and about the interconnectivity of it all, and that, in turn, not only revolutionized my technique, but made me crave to know the how and why of every piece of my body and every movement and pain and form it can take. I came out being able to be smart about my dancing, to be able to take care of myself, preventatively and in recuperation, and with a new vigor and approach to myself in self-recovery.

• ***Course Objectives:***

- To learn the various systems of the body, their role in health and how to best care for each.
- To learn the layers of mechanics and means of movement within the body and how to properly align and execute movement, from proper posture to a grand jeté.
- To identify problems and pains, identify their origins, develop an educated hypothesis of the cause, and formulate a response regimen of reparative and preventative exercises.

- ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- Being able to recognize how and when my body is operating away from proper placement and being able to take the first steps to correct those things on my own.
- A 800% better understanding of the systems, joints, muscles, connections, and nutrition of my body.
- The ability to implement all of it into my life to make me healthier.
- A complete knowledge of form, alignment, stability, dynamic Stability and efficiency in movement.

DANC 353: Dance Conditioning: Pilates

• ***Personal Overall Experience:*** Pilates was a stellar addition to my dance education because it was an opportunity to specifically target body alignment in a very controlled environment, so that when I took that knowledge into my technique classes it was not an additional thing to worry about, Pilates helped make it inherent. System and muscle groups and their role and beneficial and correct usage was reinforced from what I was learning at the same time in Kinesiology.

- ***Course Objectives:***

- To acquire a basic understanding of human anatomy from an evolutionary and functional point of view.
- To understand how each individual must be mindful of their own structure observing restrictions and imbalances in their own body.
- To observe how form follows function and recognize where neuromuscular re-education is needed in order to protect and enhance joint stability.
- To gain an understanding of the importance of the four anatomical components of core stability, how to access them and condition them in order to promote pelvic stability and thereby enhance all neuromuscular function throughout the body.
- To understand how working with different breath strategies can enhance lung capacity, deepen the body mind connection, relax areas of stress and promote cellular balance for all physiological function.
- To acquire a basic understanding of the anatomical myofascial trains of the body and how their restrictions can affect their relationships thereby causing neuromuscular imbalances and energy blockages which can be detrimental to one's health.
- To learn and execute poses and movement sequences designed to promote attention to breath, body/mind awareness, joint stability, muscular strength and release.
- To develop a personal set of exercise that restore and condition the individual's body mind during times when there is no access to a class or while injured.

- ***Specific Skills Gained:***

- Being able to recognize neuromuscular imbalances and their relationships and knowing why all body systems can affect each other.
- Knowing basic anatomical structure and its importance and knowing how

- to analyze body alignment.
- Being able to execute Pilates mat exercises and yoga poses to condition all areas of body

*****Technique Dance Classes:*****

BALLET: with Scott Heinzerling

• ***Course Objectives:***

- To acquire further understanding of the principles of classical ballet technique learned in ballet III, including developed use of alignment and use of turn-out.
- To challenge and improve the students ability to learn, analyze, and execute a continually expanding vocabulary of steps in longer and more complex sequences.
- To increase strength, stamina, and efficient use of energy.
- To further develop musical and rhythmic clarity as well as phrasing as an aide to technical performance.
- To gain more confidence in the application of this rigorous and structured technique as a tool for artistic expression.
- To expand the student's knowledge of ballet terminology.

• ***Student performance Outcomes:***

At the successful completion of the course the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- Execute increased efficiency of alignment and weight change
- Execute increased flexibility
- Execute increased musicality and rhythmic accuracy
- Execute increase special awareness
- Execute increased strength and stamina
- Execute longer movement sequences
- Execute an increased motor ability to move through space and ease during more complex combinations
- Execute increased motor control and coordination: coordinating use of head and arms with combinations emphasizing greater precision of foot work
- Acquire a greater awareness of dance as an expressive art form
- Acquire a greater affirmation and enjoyment of class work
- Execute combinations and set them on class (participation in class as a teacher)

• ***Personal Experience:*** I remember the influence Scott's classes had on me first and foremost because he was the first person that helped me to recognize and correct, as well as work towards making habits out of proper placement. He took me in my state of having been practicing wrong all my dance life and 'un-did' that 'damage' and started me on my path towards changing my body for the better.

BALLET: with Tekla Kostek

• **Course Objectives:**

- To recognize and evaluate the importance of proper placement/alignment as the fundamental base for advanced technique.
- To engage in challenging enchainements for the advancement of technique.
- To analyze and learn how to breakdown complex enchainements.
- To become familiar with and experience with musicality and personal style/artistry.

• **Student Performance Outcomes:**

- Increased strength and stamina
- Increased alignment/placement
- Increased muscular control and coordination
- Increased flexibility
- Increased knowledge of rotation/turn-out and how to maintain engaged in a properly rotated position for the benefit of technique
- Acquired ease when executing long sequences of movement
- Acquired knowledge on how certain steps properly function (especially linking steps in order to maximize allegro)
- Acquired verbal skills on how to analyze technique
- Increased sense of musicality

• **Personal Experience:** Tekla has pushed me into a new realm with my ballet dancing. When I first came to LMU, my personally placed emphasis in ballet was on executing proper alignment and technique since I had never had it before, and prior to LMU, my emphasis was entirely performance without thought to alignment. Ballet V has taken me to that place when I am able to synthesize the two and be both a functional ballerina and a performer at once.

POINTE: with Tekla Kostek

• **Course Objectives:**

- To develop fundamental skills while dancing sur la pointe
- To recognize and evaluate the importance of proper placement/alignment while dancing sur la pointe
- To engage in simple enchainements in order to focus on mastering new steps
- To analyze and learn how to breakdown individual steps in order to perform a classical variation sur la pointe

• **Student Performance Outcomes:**

- Increased strength and stamina
- Increased alignment/placement
- Increased muscular control and coordination (especially in the ankles and metatarsals)
- Increased knowledge of rotation/turn-out and how to maintain engaged in a properly rotated position for the benefit of dancing sur la pointe
- Acquired ease when executing new enchainements

- Acquired knowledge on how certain steps properly function (especially three main principles on how to properly rise sur la pointe: releve, eleve and pique)
- Acquired verbal skills on how to analyze technique
- Increased joy and confidence when faced with personal challenges
- Developed sense of style

• **Personal Experience:** Pointe at LMU has allowed me to take when I left off in high school and raise it to the next level. Implementing and performing in class variations of actual corps and solo choreography has been enjoyable and valuable to my overall and pointe technique.

MODERN: with Damon Rago

• **Course Objectives:**

- To Further knowledge and execution of modern dance technique
- To develop and refine performance skills
- To experience the joy of dance

• **Student Performance Outcomes:**

At the successful conclusion of the course, the student will demonstrate:

- An increased level of body awareness and alignment
- An increased ability to perform dance movements and phrases in the style of contemporary dance taught
- An increased ability to use focus, direction and level change to define the concept of space and spatial awareness
- An increased ability to use a variety of tempos and meters to define the concept of time
- An increased ability to use release, momentum and other movement qualities to define the concept of energy
- An increased range of flexibility, strength, balance, coordination and stamina
- The ability to observe and discuss dance as an art form
- An increased ability to accept and love oneself and one's body for its inherent capabilities
- The ability to acknowledge one's limitations and take the proper steps to overcome them
- The ability to work with others in a nurturing, trusting environment
- The ability to enjoy and be enthusiastic about the act of dancing

• **Personal Experience:** Damon transformed my view of modern dance as something archaic and undesirable to something so exciting, I couldn't wait to come to class. He also encouraged me to embrace this new feeling and style of movement and own it to perform it, instead of letting my confidence be overrun by the newness.

MODERN: with Diana MacNeil

• **Course Objectives:**

- Students will achieve accurate body alignment that is consistently held without strain
- Students will to match their bodies in a responsible healthy fashion

- Students will to strengthen their bodies though movement
- Students will greater spatial awareness in motions and in location
- Students will improve their rhythmic ability and their relationship to music
- Students will learn to use force and dynamics to effectively alter the impact of motion
- Students will how to apply personal and group corrections to their work.
- Students will to visually and kinesthetically discern differences in how movements are performed.

• ***Student Performance Outcomes:***

- demonstrate the ability to move with a well understood concept of placement and alignment
- increased flexibility without injury
- move with a heightened sense of strength
- dance with spatial knowledge, clarity and respect
- response sensitively and with rhythmic accuracy to music
- move with a variety of dynamic choices, alter performance to movement by active choice making
- perceive changes internally and externally in movement performance

• ***Personal Experience:*** Diana gave me a very strong and sturdy base in classical modern dance that has helped me tremendously in my dancing overall as well as in my contemporary modern classes that build upon classic technique. Also, Diana made sure to tell us in which classical style or influence we were doing movements from, which was a wonderful reference and very useful and needed knowledge to have.

MODERN: with Holly Johnston

• ***Course Objectives:***

- To build a strong technical foundation for supporting strength and range of physical articulation as the body converges with momentum, force, torque, suspension, attack and gravity
- To investigate movement analysis from both functional (anatomical) and aesthetic (artistic) perspectives
- To produce a dancer with a more sensitive relationship to time, space, energy as well as the use of breathe
- Build dancers with advanced/pre-professional performance skills

• ***Selected Performance Outcomes:***

With the successful completion of the course the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- Execute sequence of exercises without following instructor
- Execute and maintain functional alignment consistently throughout class exercises
- Demonstrate deliberate experiments with various dynamic qualities while performing phrase work
- Analyze movement from both functional and aesthetic perspectives
- Apply corrections to their work
- Integrate into dance performance fundamental kinesiology, body

awareness, alignment, balance, etc.

• **Personal Experience:** Holly's class has been my first experience where I feel like the level I am able to dance at is beyond the 'student' level. This has provided me with a boost in confidence and a renewed hope for a professional career. I think this has entirely to do with the manner in which Holly conducts class and the way in which she relates skills to us, and not so much to do with my actual abilities.

MODERN WORKSHOP: with Holly Johnston

• **Course Objectives:**

- To create a strong technical foundation for supporting strength and range of physical articulation as the body encounters spiral, release, momentum, gravity and attack.
- To cultivate a discerning eye for movement analysis from both functional (anatomical) and aesthetic (artistic) perspectives
- To heighten awareness to time, rhythm, space, music/silence and breath.
- To strengthen dynamic spatial acuity in motion as well as placement in space

• **Selected Performance Outcomes:**

With the successful completion of the course the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- Execute sequence of exercises without following instructor
- Execute and maintain functional alignment consistently throughout class exercises
- Demonstrate deliberate experiments with various dynamic qualities while performing phrase work
- Analyze movement from both functional and aesthetic perspectives
- Apply corrections to their work
- Integrate into dance performance fundamental kinesiology, body awareness, alignment, balance, etc.

• **Personal Experience:** Workshop gave me a perfect place to experiment and move in the rigor of the Gilliland style in a more subdued environment. It has been a great place to grow and develop confidence in my movement in the style and modern dance in general.

COMMERCIAL DANCE: with Jason Myhre

• **Course Objectives:**

- To expand the student's knowledge of advanced jazz techniques, in a commercial field
- To challenge and improve the student's ability to learn at a fast pace and execute movement correctly
- To increase strength, stamina and flexibility
- To gain more confidence in performing the art of commercial dance

• **Select Performance Outcomes:**

At the successful completion of the course, the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- Execute increased movement articulation
- Execute increased musicality and jazz style
- Execute increased flexibility, strength and stamina
- Execute increased motor control and coordination
- Acquire a greater knowledge of audition techniques
- Acquire a greater knowledge of dance as an expressive art form

• **Personal Experience:** Taking commercial dance has been an outlet for me to try and have fun, to let go, and to not concern myself so entirely with proper technique and academics (which was not very successful in a technique class, but regardless...) It has given me skills that are going to be useful in the commercial realm of a dance career and kept me in touch with the most current skills needed and fads that pass through the arena.

YOGA FOR DANCERS (World Dance): with Holly Johnston

• **Course Objectives:**

- Build a strong physical practice of asanas, based in the primary series of Ashtanga Yoga.
- To analyze the benefits of each asana from both a functional/anatomical and psychological perspective as well as from a personal point of view
- To produce a dancer with a sensitivity to their own body, balance and well being
- Develop autonomous dancers who can systematically create their own program of conditioning, therapy and rehabilitation through the practice of asanas

• **Personal Experience:** Yoga has been more than a class for me, it has been also a lifestyle change and promises to lead to a lifelong practice. What Kines did for my brain and understanding of the body and its function, Yoga has done for my body in implementing it into movement and through practice.

BEGINNING BALLROOM AND SWING (World Dance): with Karin Lynge Jensen

• **Course Objectives:**

- Learn correct body alignment, footwork, and hand positions for various social dances
- Develop a kinesthetic awareness of one's own physical abilities
- Further develop a sense of musicality and rhythm
- Increase strength, endurance, and balance throughout the body
- Perform with proficiency and clarity beginning dance movements and combinations
- Learn how to lead, and/or follow
- Acquire a greater awareness of dance as an expressive art form

• **Personal Experience:** Ballroom was initially hard for me because dance as I mostly know it is independent (sans partner) and proactive. It was difficult for me to make a transition for ballroom into within with someone all of the time a dance is going as well as follow cues instead of knowing the steps ahead of time.

“What is Dance” Essay

Melinda Ritchie

DANC 461 - Senior Thesis

Spring Semester, 2005

Dance as seen through the Eyes of Margaret H'Doubler:

A Cultural Survey of Dance

"Dance as an expression of the society it represents; its growth, from the early expressive but random movements of primitive man, to a consciously created art form, satisfying man's aesthetic sense."

A valid point that speaks to the worth of dance in our society is its endurance through the ages and its widespread influence and presence. Dance is not a phenomenon specific to one, or a certain group of cultures, but is rather a sweeping marker found all over the world and in every time period. The fact that dance is so popular and enduring can be attributed to the fact that it is a natural by-product of living. In this way, movement –both planned and spontaneous- in and of itself is a form of dance, and is inherent to having a body, emotions and visceral sentiment.

Dance is responsive to the times and culture it is being expressed within. This means that the movement is not only representative of the values and structure of that culture, but also that it is a reflective device used to convey the changes of attitudes as a culture progresses and evolves. In this way, technique and delineations of styles are not as important as one might think while discussing dance, and instead the emphasis should be placed on the feeling and story behind why the dance has appeared.

The unfortunate quality of dance is that until recently with the invention of documenting technologies, dance was a difficult art form to record. Therefore, much of our knowledge of dance from long ago is what we have remaining that has been passed down through the body memory and mental memory of those who were the dancers or audience. This raises another important aspect of dance worth noting: its relationship to music, and the further complication this liaison presents in being able to document a dance because often the timing with music is either interpretive or not at all set.

On the subject of recording, another problem (or romantic quality inherent to any art created by individuals,) is that there are subtle and refined nuances that each creator has that cannot be done justice by any documentation, even visual. H'Doubler asserts that these personal additions are specific reflections of the "emotional conditions and artistic intention of the dancer," and due to the high presence of these touches in dance, she says it "cannot be so reproduced," and therefore, in general, "it is impossible for such an art medium as dance to be preserved as a form through the ages, for its very nature lacks the elements necessary to permanency" (4).

The presence of dance throughout history has been very evident, regardless of this peril of easy decay. This fact again speaks to the pervasive nature and need of dance in any and all societies. The highlights of dance throughout the ages often coincide often with significant periods in history. Examining the role and value of dance in societies besides our own current one gives us a much more inclusive and complete understanding of the true nature of dance. By looking to the past and to our neighbors we can see how varying and interesting dance really is. If we looked only at one form of dance and tried to define such an intricate and complex phenomenon as dance by solely it, we would be

remiss in our survey and perhaps many of the most valuable and exciting qualities to the art would be left out.

Along these lines, each era of dance and type of dance gives us a specific quality to note. For example, primitive peoples in their earliest expression of dance as movement teach us that, fundamentally, dance is a reflection of human nature. This era of movement and dance mainly stemmed from the natural function of the body in its process of dictating a movement series based on emotional impulse, random movement, or an internal reaction to rhythm. Additionally, dance moved from singular body reactions and actions to being recognized as a group activity about the same time that groups and working together were being recognized as a valuable part of getting the advantage in life. Movements and sounds were based on the movements of animals, and dance was often a celebration of both religious and social life.

The three themes we see reoccurring in this era of dance are celebrations of religion, theatrical dances (telling stories of love, war and hardship, and devotional dances about the forces of nature and the qualities of the earth. What is very interesting about this era was that the people making and dancing were most likely not doing so in order to appeal to the aesthetic, theirs was not choreography for show in a critical arena. Instead, early dance was simply an expression: love, hate, anger, celebration, wants, needs, belief and thanks. H'Doubler's charming way of summarizing dance during the era of primitive man does it best, "To him, dance was magic motion by which he could influence the great forces and nature around him... At this stage dance was largely instinctive and spontaneous in its forms, serious and utilitarian in its purpose and tremendously religious and social in its value" (7).

The next major area in which we recognize a marked change in dance is during the era of the Ancients. During this time dance becomes more set and artful. The emphasis became no longer as social in nature, and other art forms (poetry, music, theater,) became the primary means of expressing the emotions we often saw conveyed through dance earlier. Intellect and organization enter into dance as life becomes more complex and spontaneity and impulse were not seen as being as acceptable any longer. Aesthetic dance is the next obvious step for such a society, which occurred as mental internalizing of movements became prevalent. Meaning was not lost when impulse was lost, but the moderation in movement became more practiced. Rituals utilized dance for the first time and dance was elevated to the status of a true art as elegance and technique start to arise as important. This era of dance was characterized by the Greek and Roman societies during their most flourishing times.

The medieval era's conception of dance takes the evolution from the primitive to the ancient era even further in the next logical steps. Instead of the Mediterranean area, the medieval dance era was more centered in Europe. During this time religion was so present that it was a true dictating force in the lives of the people, and dance naturally reflected this. Conflicts over land, religion and rights were common, and dance often relayed these battles or the qualities in which one side or another believed. This era of dance was far less intellectual than the Ancient era, and instead was marked by the spiritual devotion and uplift. The feudal society was also characterized by obedience and respect, and so dance was often restrained to show submission and prudence. Here is the first time we start to see dance being looked on as a bad influence except in very certain circumstances. This is because the body is involved and pleasure is involved, and

these two things mixed were not seen as acceptable. Social dance while more or less banned, persisted regardless, and towards the end of the era even reared up in organized ways, such as the masquerade and balls.

During the renaissance, individualism was paramount and culture emerged for the first time as an entirely separate entity from religion. This is how the 'ban' on dance was lessened, and led by the elite, dance returned back to its grace of the Ancient era and was once again being touted as a high art and a past time of the educated. Music's amazing growth during the renaissance to having complex and new instruments affected dancing as well, and movement was becoming not as dictated by beat but also now more so by melody. Thus we get the first group choreographed dances like the waltz and the polonaise. The social value of dance is widespread and the focus of many gatherings and a respected past time of everyone from the elite to the poor (but in different ways: the poor often did not have the means to learn the waltzes of the kings.)

These poor and rural communities therefore were developing their folk dances and ethnic dance was becoming more compartmentalized to each region. The royalty was asking for ballets as entertainment. Here we again see dance as a key conduit for social life and aesthetic value. Again, and more concretely being used as a storyteller and a purveyor of emotions and the values that a society found desirable. There is also another split in dance: between the professional and the completely non-trained. Folk dances need no highly developed skill and the movements themselves are instinctive to the body and natural in their ability. Other forms of dance, ballet again, for example, became highly professional, highly technical, and divorced from and regular life by now being

performed solely in theaters, instead of town squares or people's backyards, like folk and other dancing.

Dance evolved further along these lines for years with different cultures' each crystallizing their preferred means, method and context for dancing. The contemporary dance world that followed did so again in the traditions of the previous one. H'Doubler comments on this phenomenon: "The values of every age are a reflection not only of its own ways but of those in the age that preceded it. Consequently, no age can escape the obligation to pass on something of value to the next!" (26).

During the contemporary era, therefore, the traditions of the previous era were coupled with new found enlightenment with advances in science, technology and intellectual freedom. That which is available to us and that which affects us is infinitely larger and more varied than during any other era of the past. Now, instead of just the immediate culture, there was access to many others' cultures and values. Much of the dance from before was preserved, but many of the dancing that was practiced for sheer enjoyment fell stale as science and bureaucracy, industry and education took over the majority of lives for the first time. Dance became slightly trivial and less for group purpose. This is especially true of the new Americas, up to the Civil War and beyond. There was simply too much going on in the world – in any culture - for people to focus on pleasurable past times as much.

During these times the opportunities for artistic and spiritual growth were inhibited, especially when the Puritan influence was introduced and again the body and its movements were seen in a negative light. In fact, it was not until after the first World War that dance had another upswing with the return of structured social dance and

unstructured folk dances, the pleasure of the classic forms of dance and the new and exciting world of modern dance were coming into fruition. All forms of dance were now being performed in a professional setting, in a theater, and being taught to everyone from children to the academia in the universities (started by H'Doubler herself at Wisconsin University.) With the culture growing and communicating in such new and varied ways, and being influenced by so many more things (including other cultures,) the value of dance as an expression of culture has become more muddled in recent times. Still, the presence of dance itself is significant, and shows that the contemporary culture values the aesthetic, the athletic, the theatrical and the emotional.

As dance develops more in this new type of culture, old forms of dance are being abandoned for lack of interest, or because the function they performed are simply no longer needed or relevant. New dance forms are being invented for a plethora of reasons (aesthetic, function, rebellion, etc,) and are springing up (and dying out often.) H'Doubler says, "A time of change presents a confused picture" (41).

The history of dance is necessary to understand the current world of dance, and we can use the roots and influence of current dance as a tool to navigate its meaning and significance. This is an important means because now much dance is either trivialized or has broken down into forms much less rich in value than previously, (to understand this assertion, think of how in earlier times everyone danced the same variation of the waltz, and nowadays there are so many individualized dances for so many reasons, that it would impossible to claim that each has true cultural and individual value.)

The summary of dance as we now see is best left to H'Doubler herself: "The desire and need for communication as well as for expression have led man to the

discovery of aesthetic means. From this search for a means have evolved the knowledge, science, and technique of dance... We are not concerned with traditional values as answers to problems that no longer exist... The pleasure of obeying the impulse to move and to express in ordered movement remains the same in every time and place... [dance] can serve us today in our quest for richer living" (43-46).

Personal Aesthetic Statement

Melinda Ritchie

DANC 461 - Senior Thesis

Spring Semester, 2005

My Aesthetic as an Amalgamation and in Flux

From the time I started dancing when I was two, I already had preferences on movements and qualities, therefore I believe that my aesthetic has been in development since that time. Before I knew any better, I had no qualms telling my teachers what things my body did and did not like doing, what I saw that I thought was silly, or how they might improve what they were doing... according to me. Thankfully, I have since grown out of pressing my aesthetical preferences on others, (especially authority figures,) but what never changed was that I know clearly the things that I see dancers doing that I know would fit my body and that please my choreographic itches.

With every piece of training and exposure that I have had, especially from my college classes at Loyola Marymount, my aesthetic has been growing, and recently has pushed even my own understanding of my preferences. This is happening as I move in to the movement territory of original movements that I have made up that do not reflect any other traditional or set actions I have learned before. I feel like now my aesthetic is coming into the next level of development where instead of being passive about it with likes and dislikes, I am instead becoming very active: making up original steps that fit my preferences when traditional ones fail to satisfy my idea. This is a big step for me: my

choreography in high school was nothing more than a rehash of any and every jazz move I could remember strewn together in an order.

So, what exactly are my preferences? In Laban terms, I can definitely say that I prefer slash to flick, float to wring, press to glide, and dab to punch. These energies are the ones I feel like I always come back to. In my body, flicking feels silly, I want the weight behind it; I feel more of a drive to perform a slash. I make a conscious effort to include the energies I prefer less in my choreographic works on and off because I would find a dance uninteresting if it was all the same energy qualities from beginning to end. In terms of choreographing and the energies, I know that these ones I labeled as my preferences are always involved in movements I create that fall within the range of how my body naturally wants to locomote or move inherently. I have to consciously make the decision to move my body in the energy elements that I do not prefer.

I work with mainly direct paths, and small kinespheres. I know this is because both indirect movement and meandering focus makes me feel very uncomfortable. I am a really goal oriented, driven person, and while I never really thought that my work ethic would find its way into my dance aesthetic, there it is, clear and precise. I do not like having an absence of destination or a purpose to my movements. My use of small kinespheres is also due to a level of not being comfortable in my body when I use large kinespheres. Dance is a very personal and self oriented thing for me, and always having to project myself so far out with large kinespheres makes me feel like I lose my connection to the 'me' and my needs as a performer. My training in gymnastics influences me to use all levels of space, low, mid and high, because I feel just as able and comfortable hold my own weight on the ground as I do throwing that weight into and

through the air. I know that this was a boundary I had to overcome because, first I was used to ballet, which had no floor work at all, and then tap, which was entirely mid level. It took a long time for me to feel confident in breaking out of midlevel movement. This development has only been augmented by my exposure to thousands more styles by coming to college here at Loyola Marymount. I was unaware of how sheltered my dance exposure and experience was until I came here. I believe that is why my aesthetic preferences exploded my freshman year, at which time they began to encompass movement styles that the younger me would definitely had something snappy to say about.

The time elements I seek out to emphasize my aesthetic have to do with the tempo of the dancing and the use of meter. I base these both on the music and style choice I have made. In the rest of my life, I chose to listen to music that has meters that are clear and often upbeat. This is out of habit and preference. For dance, I definitely I pick music based on what music moves me, and I am usually most moved by driving, melodious songs. This meter in turn dictates the tempo I choose; either to emphasize the meter, or to contradict it in some manner.

However, something that I have come to discover this year when choreographing my duet for the Student Dance concert, was that when I choose songs with an obvious meter or sentiment or drive, I feel stuck in that range, and have a hard time challenging it in my choreography or pushing against it to add depth. Once I found a song to use for my duet that moved me no less, but was sans exact and obvious meter in favor of a droning and choppy score, my creativity and passion for the dance exploded. I didn't feel dictated or jailed in by the music I chose, and the movements I produced as a result were much

more organic, original and, for me at least, satisfying. This new knowledge on my preferences will help me to be wiser in choosing music in the future, and to remain conscious of not falling into the rut of choosing music that I know and love already.

Generally, I do not pay purposeful attention to the duration of my dances, I just let the dance end where it ends, (as in when I feel that it has reached its logical conclusion.) Either that, or I let outside factors decide, like for example, when the music comes to its compositional end. This is another aspect of my compositional style that has been changing recently, because with my duet, I had much more material than the duration of the song would allow for, so I have been playing with starting the dance before the music comes in, and ending it just after. I feel that what has resulted is a stronger voice for the dance and the two of us on stage because we are then allowed to establish those motivations before the music comes in and adds them, by nature, for us. This is another example of my hoe aesthetic, while rather set and complete, is always, always changing with each new dance experience I have, and each new idea, style or motivation I can come up with or appropriate.

I am very interested in the use of stillness in choreography, but, I have a hard time implementing it into my dances. It is an element of time I think is very powerful in movement phrases, and while I love its use, I have a hard time putting it into my pieces just yet... I feel too self-conscious. It is hard for me to own stillness in the same manner I own the movements I do. I think this comfort and ability will come in time. I do incorporate stillness in suspension often, as I feel suspension is an intricate part of the aesthetic I have developed. This has been becoming more and more easy for me and I can

get my body to produce stillness more authentically, which allows it to come out more easily in my movement aesthetic.

As far as my preferences go, I have no way to defend my choices other than what it is that feels natural and comfortable on my body. When I first started choreographing, I wouldn't listen to what my bones wanted to do as movement qualities, and instead would always use styles and qualities that were popular or better known, even though it did not feel like a fit with how I knew I actually wanted to move. I know that the big jump for me coming from there to here, where my aesthetic is so far from what I would have falsely described it as back then, is the exposure I have had to other styles.

Damon and Holly's style of modern has had a huge influence on me, and not so much because it feels the best on my body, but because it was so different from what I had known as "modern." The strength and falling of their aesthetic adding a whole new layer and dimension to mine. Another example is that, although I would never choreograph in their styles, being exposed to the new and at the time very different choreographers in the "Beyond the Mainstream Video," and Shel Wagner and Heidi Duckler's works and aesthetics changed a lot of my perceptions forever. Each one opened me up to seeing dance in a different way. Seeing spaces as performances arenas, using props, ignoring technique. All of this was so new and completely altered my perception of what I could do and include in my aesthetic. It's the big things I see that completely alter my perception of what I knew as dance that change my aesthetic, even if I never use them myself in my own work. As a note to add to this, though, I used contact improvisation for my duet for the student dance concert during the opening phrases and to help me to come up with the partnering sequences.

What all of this has lead to is a very modern based aesthetic. I hesitate to label my aesthetic as anything other than dance, because in assigning it a genre I am afraid that the conception would fall pray to the same labeling I tend to give things. Truly, my aesthetic is a diverse mélange of every style. In the same dance I will have modified tap movements and ballets steps. I have made sure to use everything, but in doing, it is very important to me to make it my own. I would not do a double parallel turn with out making sure I added arms or a gesture that reflected something about my preferences and the theme of the dance I was doing. I therefore label my aesthetic as modern because it is not able to fall into another category, all the other of which have pretty strict guidelines for what is and is not inclusive in that style. This little jazzarina has come a long way from stealing steps from different music videos, putting them together, and then calling it a dance of my aesthetic.

Where I derive my movements from, working with the aesthetic I have developed is entirely music and story based. I am a dancer who dances because music exists. My body loves to move, but I feel like music transports me away from just being in motion to dancing. One of the choreographers who influenced me the most in this manner was Karen MacDonald. Her assertion that every movement has a story behind it and that you can use stories as inspiration mirrored and clarified what I have always felt was possibly the most important aspect of how I would define my aesthetic. I use stories to dictate my movements. It could be a simple upbeat classical piano solo that I would be dancing to, but in my head and behind my movements, I would have a premise or a story that influenced and inspired all of it. My best creativity comes from my ability to connect to experiences in this way.

To choreograph a solo for Style and Forms during my junior year, I used a song about a man feeling manipulated like a puppet by different puppet-masters in his life, and so I took the imagery literally, and came up with pages and pages of movements based on the question I asked myself "how would a puppet move if it was fighting against its strings?" When I choreograph in this manner, I find I don't have to make up movements, they are already inside my body and by assigning story goals to myself, they come out easily.

This process I just described is the one of the ways in which improvising plays a role in my aesthetic. I prefer to have my dances set and planned carefully. Improvisation as a means to discover material to insert into a dance is about as much as I use it; Improvisation was almost entirely how I came up with the movements for my duet. In that case, I took the process one step further and would then reinterpret my improvised movements that come out of my body, and rework them to make sure they were as original as possible and all fit together within the theme of the dance I was doing. I have come to realize this year finally, that I can't rely on improvisation to help me to come up with material and then just stop there with it, because often in times of uncertainty I revert back to the vocabulary I know and is well known to others as well. Conversely however, I also would mention that improvisation sessions are also too where I often sporadically come out with my most original, wonderful, surprising material.

The music I use and the story I am trying to tell are the key elements in choreographing a dance, because for me, they completely change the whats and hows of the movements. I am not someone who can choreograph something to one piece of music, and then change music months later and not completely overhaul the dance as

well. I set dances to music, so when the music changes, so should the dance, according to my aesthetic. This is not to say that upon changing music, a whole new series of steps is needed, and everything prior is tossed. What I mean is that the intention and timing and motivation will change, and I feel it is necessary to keep in mind to the needs of the new music by making sure the dance augments it and is not just laid on top of it. I often don't use wallpapering of music for this reason, but when I do use music as a wallpaper, what I pull from it is a definite emotion and drive. In this way, my dances are always in direct connection to the music. For an example of how I have implemented this into my choreographic aesthetic, my solo that I did for my final presentation for Styles and Forms, it is not performed to music. I listened to a song by an artist named Bright Eyes and found inspiration from the content of the lyrics and the drive of the music. Then, I kept these sentiments and choreographed a short solo to the text of the song.

I try to be as musical as I can and choreograph to the accents and the rhythm of the song. In styles and forms, we were taught how to interpret and choreograph according to the music we chose, and this helped me to cement qualities in my works in more effective ways than I had been previously. It clarified what the process is and the thoughts I have always used in my aesthetic were augmented. This allowed me to make better and more informed decisions for my aesthetic. I make the same artistic decisions, they are just better informed now. One choreographer I saw during my junior year who greatly influenced the aesthetic I find myself with now, is Mark Morris. I was blown away seeing his company at UCLA by his use of music in ways that were so unexpected, but at the same time so obvious. He made me hear parts of the music by emphasizing them with his movements that I would not have ever heard otherwise. He used the

musicality of the movements so entirely, and really opened my eyes to the use of music in ways that go beyond just influence and accented movements. Also, seeing Ballet Prelocaj, also at Royce Hall, I found myself more moved by my unusual ideas and movements than I had ever before been. In a way, I feel like it made me more willing to be daring in my own choreography because I became aware that unusual and twisted material doesn't fall flat or alienate people, (which I am kind of ashamed to admit I previously thought was the case.)

I know that the devices that we have learned in Fundamentals and Styles and Forms allowed me to take what I would perceive as the next step in the direction of being a competent and unique choreographer, because they really gave my aesthetic dances structure and purpose. I used to feel like three minutes was an insurmountable amount of time to choreograph, I would run out of material before the first minute was up. However now that I understand and have the choreographic device skills, that one minute of raw material becomes a three minutes well structured developed dance easily. The concept of the motif has worked its way intricately into my aesthetic, I adore reincorporation of key movements in new and changed ways. I feel like it adds a glue to the dance that my movements alone might lack. In terms of augmentation, diminution and transposition, I use transposition most effectively in my dances, I am still struggling to feel like a truly grasp how to best augment and diminish, and I think that this skill will come to me in time as I play with my works more. Also, in the same way that music can dictate my inspiration for a piece, I have learned to use other things for inspiration and add that layer to my dances. Inspirations like written word, an element, a word or an emotion. In the dance I made for the November concert of my Junior year, when my music had carried

me to the extent of fresh inspiration, and I was stuck, I chose to turn to the word "lost," whose associations, connotations and feeling gave me a whole new slew of ideas and material that added to my dance by making it deeper in meaning, and more varied on stage and in choreography.

Overall, as far as I feel like my aesthetic has come in my dance career, I feel like right now is quite literally the very, very beginning of where I go. The more classes I take, and the more I continue to be exposed to new choreographers and styles, the more I will shape my own preferences. This has already happened even, my aesthetic has made huge leaps between even my freshman to my junior year, and from my junior year my senior year here in the dance program.

THESIS:
The Modernization of China –
Modern Dance in
Modern China

The modernization of China:

Modern Dance in Modern China

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Dance cannot be separated from its social and political context. Though it is often excluded from these discussions and deemed “artistic,” dance does not exist in a vacuum. Of the various genres, however, modern dance is most often seen as having political ties. Since dance reveals through its content the culture through which it was made, it can be used as a lens to view society. It is in this way that I use modern dance in China to view Chinese society. In this paper, I examine the development of modern dance in China as a series of ruptures. It is for this reason that I situate dance and Chinese society as intrinsically linked, but not co-dependent in their respective explorations of democratic values.

In the course of this analysis, I look at the significant characteristics of modern dance, the social and political agenda in China, as well as a specific full-length modern dance piece done by the Beijing Modern Dance Company called Rear Light. By analyzing Rear Light, I show how the growth of modern dance in China indicates a further level of modernization and westernization of Chinese art (and society). The specific content of this piece, points out the political and social changes that have occurred in China since the end of The Cultural Revolution, until the present day. The development of modern dance in Japan and Korea – chosen due to their geographical proximity to China - are also referenced in this observation in order to provide additional examples of political regime and social tolerance being the determining factor of the success of the arts in a country. Finally, I use interviews and correspondences with Willy Tsao, a driving force in Chinese modern dance, to add a first hand account of the development of Chinese modern dance. Moreover, also playing a large role in all aspects of the discussion is the influence and the presence of the West and western culture in

China¹ (most significantly the stigma that modern dance carried in China because it was from the West, along with also being reactionary and expressive.) Through these channels, I highlight the extensive role of Chinese society in shaping dance in China, and trace the parallels and intersections of artistic oppression and strict governmental regime.

Modern Characteristics

It is important to know that modern dance in China was not just a natural progression². Instead, modern was a large departure from all four of the major forms of dance found previously in China (folk, minority, classical and ballet³.) Therefore, before

¹ The West, as I will define it, includes the cultures most identified with Europe and The United States.

² Dance is not a recent phenomenon for China. In fact, scholars agree that ancient Chinese society had one of the richest dance cultures of the time (Schmidt, "Slumbering" 25). Thousands of years ago, Chinese culture featured dance as a very prominent and integral part of ritual and social life. The very first Chinese dance known to scholars dates to around 4,000 BCE. The importance and appearance of dance as early as 6,000 years ago has been extrapolated from "vivid and quite mature dance images" found on decorated clay pots that have been excavated from the western regions (near the Qinghai Province) of China in 1973 (Ou 28). This long of a dance tradition puts into perspective how young comparatively the European dance tradition is, which dates back only centuries (Schmidt, "Slumbering" 25).

³ The dance seen circa 4,000 BCE was the foundation of what is now known as traditional Chinese dance. The term "traditional Chinese dance" can be broken down into three major subcategories: folk, minority and classic. It is important to know, then, that when I speak of dance in China having a definitive history to follow, and which form of "traditional" dance in China that would later have clear influence, I am mainly referring to is the Classical subcategory of Chinese dance. Traditional Chinese folk dancing refers to the cultural dances specific to the Han ethnicity in China. This ethnicity's traditional dances are characterized as the folk dances of China even though they are only one of 56 ethnicities in China, simply because of the fact that an overwhelming percentage of the "Chinese" people are Han. According to the fourth national census, which was taken in 1990, 91.96% of the total population in China is of the Han minority, leaving the remaining 55 ethnic groups representing only 8.04% of the population ("People"). This 8.04% of the population are therefore referred to as the national minorities of China, and their folk dances are given the label of minority dance. Minority Chinese dance is defined as being the dances of the other 55 minorities that live in China.

we look at exactly what events unfolded to bring modern dance to China, we need to unpack stylistic differences, and discern why it might be perceived as more of a social threat to the Chinese government than ballet or the classical Chinese forms.

Of primary importance within the context of my thesis, is that fact that modern dance began as an entirely Western art form. Modern first arrived at the end of the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century. The original modern dance pioneers were from the United States and Germany, as were the bulk of those who followed and continued to shape and define modern dance. Modern, like any dance style, is hard to sum up with generalities of what “defines” that style of dance aesthetic. For modern dance, this difficulty is due to the organic nature of the style. Helen Tamaris, a pioneer of the genre wrote, “There are no general rules. Each work creates its own code,” (qtd. In Anderson 165), so that modern is mainly concerned with the “expressive power of movement,” and “choreographic experimentation,” (Anderson 172). Still, modern dance can be described by certain qualities; it is experimental, iconoclastic, emotional, theatrical and generally serious. It also highlights the asymmetric, the ground space (instead of the air) curves of the body and in space, and fierceness (Anderson 172). To round out the definition better, it is equally important to describe modern dance by what it is generally not: strict, structured, regulated, or accepting of either frills and glamour ... nothing like

The subcategory of Classical style Chinese dance is derivative of the dances performed for the Chinese royalty and in the imperial courts during the years of dynastic rule. This type of traditional dance was performed solely for entertainment, unlike folk and minority traditional dance which could often serve a ritual purpose or religious meaning. The influences and origins of the movements typical to Classical Chinese dance are mainly derivative from the more popular folk dances, as well as martial arts and the Chinese operas. Classical Chinese dance is the descendant of the dance that has been dated back to 4,000 BCE. Between that time and what is considered its peak – during the Tang dynasty: 618 to 906 ACE – Classical Chinese dance was growing and expanding in importance and significance to Chinese society (Ou 30).

ballet or either show or folk dancing were when modern dance was being developed for the first time in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Described by dance scholar Julia Foulkes, in *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey*, what was most important to the modern dance artist was “individual expression and having the artistic product relay that intellectual or emotional process. For modern dancers life was effortless and weighty; their grounded movement and intense faces embodied this idea. More specifically, the Nietzschean duality of restraint and liberation... formed the basis of their movement,” (17). This idea of duality that Foulkes identifies is evident in Graham’s philosophies of contraction and release and Humphrey’s understanding of fall and recovery, both significant departures from ballet, show, and folk dancing. At the time, all of those styles, especially ballet, were characterized by their held and postures bodies and even levels. Even the accents in ballet, the furthest departure from modern dance, were safe and did not carry as much force and weight as was being explored in modern dance. To help illustrate the kind of ballet aesthetic that the early modern pioneers were reacting against, think of paradigms of late-1800s classical ballet like Swan Lake and The Nutcracker⁴.

The movement vocabulary of modern dance is often called pedestrian for its walking, skipping, jumping and hopping. Complexity is not as important as intention and modern dance’s reactionary foundation permitted modern pioneers to alter everything

⁴ It is important to understand that in contemporary times, ballet is as indefinable and varied as modern dance. The comparisons I draw from in order to juxtapose with modern are specific to a historical era of ballet’s aesthetic, chosen specifically because it was what was “ballet” at the same time modern dance is first seen and against what it was reacting.

from movement qualities, to costuming, to content, to the lines the body. Still it is hard to determine what was the catalyzing factor that sparked the creation of modern dance, for its pioneers each sought to break new ground for different reasons. Oftentimes it was a reaction to the dance styles that came before it, which its pioneers felt were too rigid, structured, formal and above all else, superficial. Also, responding to cultural influences that occurred during its development, modern dance choreography often presented ideas that were important to the cultures they developed in, specifically the Western/European cultures of Germany and the United States. Modern dance had the feel of rebellion within it, and it called to many dancers who also sought to question value systems (Anderson 171).

According to dance historian Jack Anderson's *Ballet and Modern Dance*, modern dance depends on the idea that it is rebellious and will continue to feed on new situations to rebel against and react to and it progresses. Thus, "Modern dance has continued to develop as a result of young dancers learning from then going beyond – or even actually rebelling against – their elders. It is certainly significant that the two nations in which early modern dance prospered, America and Germany, had no creatively significant ballet companies at the time. Therefore, idealistic dancers felt obligated to reinvent dance as they went along" (171). This development, and the natural cycle of rebel and renew in the arts, did not arise in all parts of the world simultaneously. In China, modern dance entered the scene much later. There are two reasons for this: China had no dance culture to react against (see footnotes) around this time (1800-1950,) and the political control in China prohibited this same kind of expression and reaction.

When modern dance did finally develop and arrive in the U.S. and Europe, the reactions there were mixed – mostly because of the large departures many of the first modern artists took from what had been seen in dance previously. Modern dance pioneers for the first time danced barefoot, which was considered almost as shocking as being nude on stage for some audiences. They used music that was not necessarily meant to be danced to, and spoken word as accompaniment. Costumes strayed far from tutus and chorus girls' dresses to everything from silk scarves to togas to simple black boxy dresses. Minimalism was key in the costuming to make sure to maintain the focus in the dancer and the work. The primary motive was to be expressive – even if recognizable steps were not used to do so.

New and unrecognizable (in relation to previous standards) steps are very much a large part of the aesthetic of modern dance. Beyond that (as mentioned) chasing an exact set of characteristics to “define” modern dance is impossible as the nature of the style invokes constant change and the incorporation of new ideas. This kind of reactionary and expressive dance would be a large departure for dance in China. This fact is what makes the arrival of modern dance so significant; it disrupted current aesthetics trends that were characteristic of dance in China. In order to see just how opposing the aesthetics of modern dance and classical Chinese dance are, I will now explain some of the basic, more common characteristics of classical Chinese dance.

Traditional Chinese dance, in the older sense, often incorporated flexed feet and parallel legs, drum like rhythms, a grounded sense of the body's center of gravity, and a more innately dynamic manipulation of the extremities would commonly be seen (Chan 3). In classical style of traditional Chinese dance, the body remained an anchor that

stayed relatively still, while the appendages did the bulk of the elaboration. Modern dance could also have these elements, but chances are that in a dance choreographed to satisfy the modern dance aesthetic, the body would not be upright and held the entire time like in Chinese classical dance, but instead have moments and phrases where the torso and pelvis were dropped and swung. The lines and placement of the body in the new classical Chinese dance hold the same aesthetics as valuable as the more traditional classical Chinese dance because it has been strongly influenced by the Russian ballets systems and Western ballet training.

Additional common aspects of both ballet⁵ and classical Chinese dance are a lifted sternum, turned out feet and legs, fully extended limbs to create long and lean body-lines, and a goal to reach a certain weightlessness and an emphasis on moving the limbs almost independent from an anchoring torso (Anderson 99). Again, modern would likely have these hallmarks present as a part of its aesthetic, but modern dance's aesthetic would also incorporate these qualities' exact opposites and the whole movement spectrum in between. The reaction, or the opposite, or all these elements would be just as common – if not more so – in modern dance. The spine and torso are much more mobile in modern dance than they are in the more bound styles of ballet and classical Chinese dance. Traditional lines of classical Chinese dance that are angular and tilted could be re-imagined to being bent and turned in for a modern dance. The important aspect of presentation and show in classical Chinese dance is also an opposite to modern dance,

⁵ Again, here we will reference the specific time period/aesthetic of ballet illustrated by classic works like "The Nutcracker" and "Swan Lake," which are also related to Chinese Classical dance because of the fusion of that exact type of ballet with Classical Chinese dance, redefining it and common its characteristics.

which, while it is created to be seen, does not always address the audience as in classical Chinese dance (and ballet).

Other movement vocabulary common to classical Chinese dance (not typically found in modern dance) are the physical aesthetics of emphasizing the body's upper torso, the highlighting of the trunk, emphasis on finger articulation, as well as special attention detailed and poised hands, necks and heads (Wang, Y. 127). Simple and basic movements and preferred in Chinese classical dance, because they produce an effect that is subdued and graceful, rather than overtly expressive and dynamic.

Subtlety and calmness are characteristic of classical Chinese dance. So much so that the style could easily be described as reserved. Modern dance, on the other hand, tends to emphasize extroversion. Modern covers all ends of the intensity spectrum, and can be gentle in the way classical Chinese dance is, but, while modern can serve be both gentle and explosive, the delineation between classical Chinese dance and modern dance is that classical Chinese is more commonly danced with more reserved characteristics of movement.

In dances of the classical Chinese style, the story and emotion are shown through elaborate and intricate gestures⁶. In modern dance emotion is shown through the whole

⁶ Specific gestures of the hands and feet completely change the meaning of the movement. Even changing the palms from up to down, or the direction of the swirl of the arm changes the intention and the intensity of the movement. Feet are articulated in much the same manner, and often the walking on stage is in circular pathways at an inwardly inclining angle. Dancers also float by walking with quick fluid steps to the side (much like a crab moves laterally while still facing forward) (Chan 4). All of these characteristics are specific to Chinese classical dance and show a pride in the ethereal, the graceful, the superhuman (that which is not seen in every day human movement,) fluidity and delicacy ("Study Guide" 5). According the a guide to Chinese dance published by the Nai-Ni Chen Classical Chinese dance company, "a Chinese dancer today is expected to study the classical court dances embedded within the Peking Opera movement style as

body in its entirety, with particular attention paid to the expressiveness of the chest and head. Eye coordination and the use of circular patterns in space with every part of the body, as well as extensive inclusion of props round out the body's aesthetics and very specific to classical Chinese dance and have little place in modern dance. Rhythmically, there is an unusual (by Western standards) emphasis on accents in the choreography in relation to the music ("Study Guide" 3) in Chinese classical dance as well. Because modern dance and classical Chinese dance have such divergent aesthetics, it is interesting that modern dance came into China at all. In most other countries where modern dance has appeared, the development has been in a linear fashion, borne out of other styles and this is not the case with China. The fissure that existed between the aesthetics of classical Chinese dance and modern dance, as well as the Chinese government's aversion to such western cultural imports like modern dance, make for an interesting rupture in the evolution of dance in China. In the history of dance in China, modern dance's development was a sudden, unlikely burst of innovation for dance in China.

Modern dance came to China as early as 1937. Wu Xiao-Bang, a Chinese native introduced the technique to China after studying in Japan. He brought with him an

well as numerous forms of folk dance. The classical Chinese dancer must begin training at a very young age and is required to study martial arts, acrobatics and stylized theatrical movements on a daily basis. Dance technique typically includes work with such props as handkerchiefs, ribbons, ritual weapons and fans," ("Study Guide 3). This points out that while it is not that and technique. Not many forms of stage dance use props as a main, necessary component of their aesthetics. To help explain why props are so vital to the Chinese Classical aesthetic, Wang Yuanlin, a contributing author to *Social Sciences in China*, explains: "In China the stage props were integrated with the beauty of the dance, as the sword...is used in the sword dance. Should any of these props be discarded or exchanged for another, the body movements in these dances would lose their aesthetic meaning regardless of how beautiful the dancer looks or how graceful his or her movements and postures are" (Wang 132).

ideology referred to as “Expressive Dance.” Expressive Dance was derived from the movement styles and ideas developed in Germany by Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss. This early incarnation of Chinese modern dance was very patriotic as a reaction to the issue of the Sino-Japanese war. The war against Japan was a big issue in China and many of the arts, and especially this Expressive Dance, were reflective of the Chinese people’s pride in their country and their war-time patriotism (Tsao email). Expressive dance never caught on and throughout the communist regime that was established in 1949, classical Chinese dance and ballet were the only two noticeable styles of dance in China for quite some time – until 1979, when we first see modern dance imported – and another important rupture in the history of dance in China occurs.

After the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 until 1973, modern dance crept slowly into mainland China. This was helped along by a new policy in China that had a greater tolerance Western culture (Wesemann 1). This correlation is important, and though I touched upon it previously, it is important to return to its significance. Modern dance has been a huge part of western dance culture for about a century has had broad influence elsewhere in the world, mainly Europe. This correlation to the Western world made it a prime target for the communist party during the years China was in full rule under Mao, (1949-1976). This communist regime had their hand in the arts and made sure that all arts were serving the Party.

Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party from its inception until his death, and cultural and political icon in China throughout all his years of rule, had very strict policies regarding the arts in China. His policies would not allow for any importation of foreign ideas in art, or even any art that did not serve the purpose of the

communist party. In his *Talks at the Yan'an*, a "Forum on Arts and Literature," from 1942, Mao proclaimed: "Literature and the arts must serve the workers, the peasants, the soldiers and the broad masses of the people" (qtd. in McDougall). This definition was afterwards considered the classic guideline limiting the purpose and place of arts in China, clearly defining the standards for the years during Mao's lifetime.

Prime examples of arts that were fostered under Mao's communist regime to serve the party are the propaganda paintings and posters, and the ballets that were written during the time that were given the title of "Revolutionary Ballets." Gone were tutus and ethereal themes, replaced with uniforms and guns performed en pointe. These ballets were developed by the Communist regime during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Modern dance, whose "nature ... attempts to reflect the present society and always brings up the darker side of the human nature" was considered against the Communist idea, "which suggests that the arts should bring a brighter picture of life to the audience and should educate the people at large" (Tsao email).

Once Mao died, the Eleventh Party Central Committee (in December 1978) relaxed his policies. In their place, they instituted a deliberate opening of the country to previously shut out Western influence. This new policy was called The Open Door Policy (also called the Policy of Reform and Opening Out), and the purpose they were pursuing was to accomplish the "four modernizations," (in the areas of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology ("Academies" 2). This was to be accomplished by becoming more liberal, and allowing Western industrial nation to be considered for the first time suitable sources from which China could learn from – in terms of society and technology and culture. Also helping the arts in China was another boost just after 1979,

when there was an announcement that there was to be a shift in the government's attitude towards the arts. Now, it was said, the government was there "not to interfere, but to guide," (Wang, L. 36).

This meant that for the first time since the founding of the new nation, Chinese students could go abroad to study and were encouraged to look to the west for improvements and advancements. Also, Westerners were allowed in China again, as it was thought they would bring with them influence and prosperity (in terms of Westerners being able to invest in projects in China.) Therefore, it is no surprise that Chinese culture was greatly influenced by all the new ideas coming into the country, and that there was a blossoming in the arts, especially in art forms that could now be influenced by, and taken from, the West, (including, as we've seen, modern dance.)

Modern dance, which has a definite tie to the West was therefore kept out of China by the communist regime, and its eventual entrance came only as a result of the Open Door Policy. This kind of radical shift in policy was only possible after Chairman Mao had passed away, as he was the most fervent proponent of keep China isolationist and keeping all arts to serve the sole purpose of helping the communist party in some direct way. This kind of sudden change in policy and political tolerance is one of the reasons why the culture in China, and especially the development of the arts came in bursts and swings. In particular, modern dance came as a sudden departure from dance seen previously in China, as well as the type of art that society would have tolerated.

Willy Tsao, another man who is largely personally responsible for modern dance's entrance into China, writes, "Before the open door policy, everything associated with the West was regarded as bad---things that may corrupt and deprive the people of China.

This thinking stemmed from the historical understanding of the West as the colonizer. Even after 1979, the relationship between China and the Western world had been like riding a roller coaster, until the year 2002 when China finally was accepted into the WTO and the Olympics” (Tsao email). Tsao mentions that once the Open Door policy took effect, modern dance had the political and social ability to enter into China, but this did not mean that its entrance was sudden and successful. Rather, early explorations of modern dance in China were on a small scale: the first introductions of the style were in a series of experimental classes that were to only last for five years. These classes were funded by Asian Cultural Council (out of New York City) and the teachers were from the American Dance Festival, among other reputable schools from all over the world (Ou 29).

These classes, spearheaded by a woman named Yang Mei-Qi, ushered modern dance into China. The importation of these classes was a direct result of Yang Mei-Qi’s travels to the United States in the early-1980’s. Traveling with governmental permission to the United States as the head of the Guangdong Dance Academy, Yeng Mei-Qi attended the American Dance Festival that is held annually in Durham, North Carolina. At this festival, Yeng Mei-Qi saw modern dance for the first time. She was enthralled by the experience and decided this was a style that was unlike anything in China, and also one that should be taught in China. Upon leaving the United States, Yeng Mei-Qi requested, and was granted, permission from the Chinese government to teach modern dance in China. She enlisted the help of Charles L. Reinhart and the festival she had just attended to help supply her with the staff she would need to bring modern dance to China. This was how some of the teachers from the American Dance Festival wound up

teaching in China later. Yeng Mei-Qi developed a three-year curriculum in modern dance, at the completion of which, a student would receive a diploma (Schmidt "Dancing" 10). The Guangdong Dance Academy was, prior to Yang Mei-Qi's visit to States, solely a classical dance school: ballet and traditional Chinese dances only were taught.

Despite ADF's involvement, Tsao confirms that modern dance in China wasn't fully developed or recognized until the 1990s (Tsao Q&A). Tsao's influence on modern dance in China is significant, so much so that it would not be a stretch to say that without Willy Tsao, modern dance would not have taken root in mainland China. This brings us to an important distinction: that "China and Hong Kong are two separate issues" (Tsao email). Tsao, like many others started out his modern dance involvement in Hong Kong. This distinction is very important because, not only did a lot of the artists and dancers that would come to main-land China to pioneer modern dance start in Hong Kong, but also because Hong Kong, which, while it was a part of China, was not ruled by the central government in Beijing, (except for on issues of national defense and diplomatic relations) ("History").

The reason there was a more relaxed atmosphere in Hong Kong while at the same time there was a very strict and invasive communist interference regime on the mainland, was due to the "policy of 'One Country, Two Systems,' [in which] China agreed to give Hong Kong considerable autonomy, allowing its existing social and economic systems to remain unchanged for a period of 50 years" ("History"). Tsao, who began his modern dance career and exploration under the more relaxed Hong Kong regime, (which

was not communist or biased against Western influence,) explains the situation he encountered in Hong Kong just after the main-land had ended its Cultural Revolution:

The cultural scene in Hong Kong at the time was almost like a vacuum---no money, no audience, no venue. The only good thing of it was that we were free to do anything. No government interest meant that there was no government intervention. The early group of the City Contemporary Dance Company [the troupe Tsao began in Hong Kong – one of the first modern dance companies started in China, (including both mainland China and Hong Kong,)] was like a real family, sticking tightly together, finding its own money, building its own audience, creating its own space to perform. Not until the mid-80s, when the British understood that the Chinese government was determined to take back the colony, did the Hong Kong government then realize the importance of building up a Hong Kong cultural identity. The CCDC started to receive government subvention in 1986 and subsequently became the flagship dance company for Hong Kong. Today, because of the impressive works created by the company in the past, the government respects the company and makes no attempt to control or influence the artistic direction of the company whatsoever (Tsao email).

As Tsao's quote indicates, modern dance on mainland China, was directly effected by the more established modern dance scene in Hong Kong. Since artists could establish themselves with less intervention and pressure in Hong Kong, they would begin there and then continue on to mainland China. This was exactly the course that Tsao took.

After establishing himself as an artist in Hong Kong, he "went to China in 1987 to teach (for 5 years)" and of this experience, he says "the experience in Hong Kong helped

tremendously [because he] learned to take the position that modern dance was not a western art form, but the honest expression that the artist reflected his true self in a contemporary society” (Tsao email). With this Western de-emphasized, artist-emphasized philosophy, Tsao started the Guangdong Modern Dance Company in 1992, and in 1999 became the head the Beijing Modern Dance Company. Tsao figured prominently in these events because he was wealthy enough and therefore influential in Chinese society and was able to help fund projects and handle diplomacy (Tsao Q&A). Tsao describes modern dance’s transition into China as rocky, but stable: “During those years, modern dance in China had not been a smooth sailing. Not just that it was politically incorrect to promote something seemed to be associated with the West, but also that the traditionalists in a relatively conservative society were totally at odds with this new, and thus strange and ugly, form of dance” (Tsao email).

This commentary describing modern dance’s entrance into China as being slow and challenged is echoed in an article in the dance journal *Ballett International*, which claims “However, [the establishment of companies on mainland China in the early 1990s] did not mean [modern dance] was thriving and unchallenged by more accepted ways of dancing. As of 1990, modern dance was very much still a “largely uncharted territory,” (Schmidt, “Dancing” 11). This timeframe can be summed up by seeing it was the arduous transition between was the time that modern on mainland China as a classroom tool to the stage, as an art that was being performed.

In the 1990s modern dance was still a ‘largely uncharted territory’ because the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 put a halt on the momentum towards openness that followed the Cultural Revolution. It was at that point that the freer reigns on expression

and opinion, including artistic expression, were tightened in response to what the government felt was political expression going too far. As a result, the government decided to rethink its generous Open Door Policy and begin to again regulate the arts (Rubidge 21). Prior to Tiananmen Square, and then slowly again, afterwards, there was an increase in the accepted level of tolerance towards everything Western in China – which would naturally include modern dance. In these decades following the end of the Cultural Revolution, because there was more artistic liberty, there was a reactionary trend in arts towards experimentation (especially with Western ideas), a growth in the number of people practicing art, and change in the kinds of art being practiced were (MOMA 91).

After the student uprisings at Tiananmen, experimentation on arts went more into the underground. For this period of time in China, this situation of experimentation was described as “not unlike that of early modernism, including its great variety. The work ranges from official academic to Dadaist renaissance, from sugared sentimentality to blistering satire, from intuitive expressionism to ascetic abstraction.” (MOMA 91.). With an art form that moved from prohibited, to allowed, to encouraged over a short period of time (about forty years) created a very tumultuous cultural climate—one in which modern dance companies were forming and trying to build a base of financial support and acceptance. Tsao speaks of this particular era in modern dance in China:

When China finally came of age and entered the era of modernization, the most sensitive group of the Chinese artists [Tsao includes himself in this group,] had no choice but to sound out its opinion and emotion in its own way. It was with this belief that I went to China [from Hong Kong]. I had been engaged in numerous debates and arguments with the journalists, critics and government officials. I was

happy to find that although some occasional stubbornness, most people in China did have a reasonable mind. And more importantly, the flow of information and the participation in the world events helped the people in China to widen their perspective (Tsao email).

Tsao says that his drive to go to great lengths and take so many risks to pursue modern dance in China, was also fueled by his love of the art, and the hope of spreading that love to others on the mainland:

When looking into the eagerness in the eyes of the young dancers, and conversing with young people who were so enthusiastic to learn more about the outside world, I felt an obligation. While Hong Kong was seen as a cross-road and gateway between the China and the world, I was in a perfect position to help my friends with something that I valued most (Tsao email).

So, Tsao took this chance to use the opportunities he had available because of his work in Hong Kong to then provide and establish companies on the mainland. These companies have had lean years since their respective inceptions in the years between 1987 to 1992, but have recently come into increasing recognition and acclaim. China today is still changing, and the politics are no longer as strict as they were directly following the Tianamen Square incident. Thus, as China modernizes, (and goes further down the road of Westernization, which, in the global sense, seems to go hand in hand with modernizing,) modern dance responds.

Though, "Modern dance in China today is still young and unfamiliar to the majority of the population, but is no longer seen as foreign, non-Chinese, or the devilish influence from the West" says Tsao, speaking in a correspondence dated April 11th, 2005. Modern

dance's entry into China represented a change in Chinese culture, as does its full arrival in more contemporary times. This more recent change is the transition into a more modernized China. Modern dance being fully established, though fledgling, in China means a lot of new and original choreography for the mainland. By the mid-1990's after the establishment of the initial founding modern dance companies, it was becoming clear that most of the flashes of creative insight in dance in China were coming from the modern dance end of the spectrum (Wang, L. 37). This is partially attributed to the generation of dancers that were now young, but grown, having experienced the Cultural Revolution's after effects first hand. These dancers and choreographers have a unique way of perceiving and understanding the China that now exists for them (Rubridge 23). This world the younger generation finds themselves in still respects the old traditions and peoples' rights to still value old ways, but now another emphasis is placed on also breaking free from that barrier. This is the new cultural identity in China: the simultaneous shrugging off of old traditions as a restraint, while coddling it for inspiration and identity. According to historian Sarah Rubridge's commentary on the new face of dance in China, "the work [done by the new generation] seems to suggest that these artists take the position that traditional artistic forms alone are no longer an appropriate means of expressing their cultural identity, for traditional forms which have their origin in the previous age do not take into account the contemporary political, social and cultural environment, nor indeed the irrevocable effects of the colonist period" (21).

So what have the new generation of dancers in China done to update their more known and traditional forms of dance to meet the new cultural identity? Most definitely they have incorporated the Western ideas of modern dance, but a main goal is not to

“Westernize” or as Sarah Rubridge puts it, “pit East against West,” (Rubridge 22). What she suggests is happening in the development of modern in China as it takes on Western dance is more of a conversation between the two; not between the two countries, but between the two types of dance within China itself: more contemporary dance in China vs. the more known Ballet and Classical styles.

It is in this way that “non-Western artists are reclaiming their own, transformed, traditions and re-conceptualizing them anew in light of contemporary experiences,” (Rubridge 22). Provocative movements and other things bordering on the taboo began to appear around 1996 (Wang L. 35). It is timely too, that such leaps forward in Creative fuel appeared for the new generation. There had been a lull in dance in China just before we start to see modern. Scholar Lan-Lan Wang in a *Ballett International* article titles “Eastern Geese and Western Swans,” calls this the drained fossilized forms of the old styles, and quotes a program note written by a leading dance figure in China: “It has all become a set of formulae... What is comforting to know is that this group of young people are still exploring...” (34).

Despite all the forward momentum, there are some choreographers, like Pit Fong, who are proud that all of her work will “inevitably bear traces of her Chinese heritage, even though it’s not the main focus of her artistic agenda” (Rubridge 23). According to Fong, Asians have an inherently different body rhythm than Westerners, which she thinks will always show up as a characteristic of either ethnicities aesthetic inherently. Coupled with Fong’s idea about natural rhythm is the fact that China has its own specific political landscape, and for such a vast country the experience of living within its borders will be different for each person there. This would mean that there are so many possibilities for

what China can produce as talent and art that the vastness of it is inescapable – and therefore largely unpredictable.

There is, however, an emergent shift in the likely course of artistic action as shown by the aesthetic choices of Chinese choreographers. This move to distance themselves from any preoccupation or tendency to incorporate Chinese themes into their works has spawned a sense of culture neutrality. This is spearheaded, not surprisingly, by Willy Tsao, who says that current/future trend is directly related to keeping the works for whom they are meant: the artist. Otherwise, choreographic pieces get caught up in being assigned a culture and an identity. Echoing this though, Tsao says “Company works are not meant for the westerners, that the works are not meant for the Chinese audience as well, that the works are for the artists themselves only” (Tsao email). Even though this is Tsao’s opinion on the subject, the piece done by The Beijing Modern Dance Company that I will discuss does signify cultural specificity, even if the intent was to have the work be culture-neutral.

The Beijing Modern Dance Company as Representative of the New Cultural Identity

The Beijing Modern Dance Company, founded in 1992 and is directed by Willy Tsao (who, though, is not the main choreographer). While not the first modern dance company in China, it is the most boundary breaking companies there today. There are a handful of professional modern dance companies in China now, and more beyond that which are local and regional companies. Though the exact number of modern dance companies is unclear, what is known is that it is a rather small number, especially compared to the number of countries whose modern dance scene is more established. The

Beijing Modern Dance Company is the only non state-supported, international touring modern dance company in China. This allows the various choreographers and artistic talents behind the Beijing Modern Dance Company to have more freedom than other companies that are still subject to some degree of government intervention and censorship. The way that the Beijing Modern Dance Company was allowed to be non government-run was that Willy Tsao petitioned the government to allow this unusual exception. At a talk he gave post show when the Beijing Modern Dance Company came to Los Angeles, (March 4th and 5th, 2005,) Tsao spoke of these events⁷. He mentioned that perhaps why he had had such luck to be allowed this was due to his status in China as well as the fact that when he asked, modern dance was a start-up... not yet seen as too lucrative or a threat that might be a risk for the government (Tsao Q&A).

Actively involved in modern dance's inception in to China, Tsao has had a major hand in a no less than three of the five largest professional dance companies China has ever hosted: City Contemporary, Guangdong, and now the Beijing Modern Dance Company. Tsao's legacy in the art form carries with him a celebrity, or more accurately an authority that affords the projects he is involved in special attention. Tsao puts his all into whatever project he is working on, and right now that is working with the Beijing Modern Dance Company and touring with them on their debut to United States audiences of their current work Rear Light.

Tsao said there are restrictions that most dance companies in China must work under, (that there are taboos and areas that he says are "understood" are to be avoided; he

⁷ One of the two choreographers of Rear Light, Li Hanzhong, was also a part of the talk, but since he did not speak English, his questions and answers were translated through Tsao.

left it at that.) Since modern dance is not as lucrative or widely viewed medium film is, there are no explicit or legal rules to which the creative team must adhere. In 1999 Tsao asked the Chinese government if his work with the Beijing Modern Dance Company could be independent from government funding so the company could be left rather alone in the creative process – a rarity. This, of course, Tsao claims came into full realization only after a few years of negotiations and gradual weaning of the company away from state guidance. He says that they still need to apply for paper in order to perform, and that in being independent the government acknowledges their existence only now. Tsao is hopeful that his companies grace in the eyes of the state may actually soon become more than just aware. For this very trip to the U.S. the international airfare needed for the entire company was paid for by the state. Tsao feels like this was a way for the government to unofficially ‘approve’ of the work that they are doing, and encouraging their art (Tsao Q&A).

The reaction to companies like the Beijing Modern Dance Company is always mixed in places outside of China. This is because of the misconception when dance patrons hear the term ‘Chinese Modern Dance’ that they automatically assume while they will see will portray the traditional China more associated with classical Chinese dance. This is not the case, especially in current years, because the dances that are being created in contemporary times reflect the present. Themes inherent to the Chinese way of life (morals, religion, philosophy, etc) will always play a part in the choreography of Chinese natives. These elements, however, are generally de-emphasized in current Chinese modern dance works.

Tsao makes an important point: modern dance in China will of course naturally have a traditional Chinese influence on occasion – such is the nature of being aware of one's cultural traditions – but Chinese modern dance should not be limited to them. This means that choreographers living in China will unavoidably have Chinese culture that seeps into them, and thus, indicators of Chinese values and aesthetics will be inherent to the work of someone who has lived in that society. However, Tsao says, just because Chinese choreographers have this tendency, there is no reason that there should be an entire genre of “Chinese modern dance” subcategorized under the broader “modern dance” heading. Tsao asserts it is all modern dance, regardless of its country of origin. Driving this point home, Tsao rhetorically asked the audience, “After all, what does it mean to be Chinese? What *is* Chinese? What *is* modern dance, if not modern?” (Tsao Q&A). He describes modern dance in his world as provocative and groundbreaking, and to him, the traditions of classical Chinese dance don't incorporate either of these inspirations. He says that to other people, they might, but not for him... and yet, he took the time to then point out, both of them are Chinese (Tsao Q&A).

This rather poignant story can be illustrated by an anecdote that was shared of a (rude) man who stood up in the middle of one of Rear Light's performances in New York and was screaming, “This isn't Chinese! This is so not Chinese!” and then he walked out. Tsao said that this was funny to him because it just illustrated how a lot of people still have vast misconceptions about China, the Chinese people, Chinese society and Chinese dance. “China is a lot like modern dance,” he said “Both are really moving forward and making a lot of changes and a lot of growth” (Tsao Q&A). On the same subject, Tsao says: “Surprisingly, I find today that while China is advancing rapidly in to modernity,

there are still misconceptions about what is “Chinese” to most of the westerners. I really don’t know how it will affect the choreography or works by the Chinese modern dancers. Some of the dancers or choreographers may choose to comment this phenomenon in their works, but my feeling is that most of the Chinese modern choreographers could not care less. After all, the misconception is a problem of the westerners, and the serious Chinese choreographers have enough issues in China to take care of” (Tsao email).

Tsao hopes to correct the misconceptions Westerners have about modern-day life in China during the Beijing Modern Dance Company’s tours. The company travels all over the world, often doing cultural exchanges with companies in other countries and working with foreign Embassies. Just before the U.S. leg of their tour, the Beijing Modern Dance Company had a five-week stint in France, and after the U.S. they will head back to Europe, spending the majority of the time in Italy. Tsao is pleased with his company’s acceptance throughout the rest of the modern dance community, he says it validates that modern dance in China is competitive and professional.

In terms of his own government, Tsao said that he was delighted with a recent development in his country’s relationship with the state. In general, as mentioned previously, the relationship is just acknowledgement. However, recently a Chairman in the Chinese government took the Beijing Modern Dance Company along with him on a cultural visit to South America. The Beijing Modern Dance Company performed as an example of what was going on in “the contemporary side of China” (Tsao Q&A). This means that not only as Tsao put, does “modern dance seem to be on the government’s agenda now,” but this means that the state was looking to exhibit China as a new and completely – art and all – modern country. Tsao said that, just like he and his company

are trying to break misconceptions, the government must have a similar agenda. They both are trying to fight that idea that some people have that China has not evolved past Mao, or even the dynasties. Tsao feels the world would be more comfortable if China just stayed in their pre-modernization place and didn't evolve, didn't touch Western culture, and didn't progress into a contemporary society. Tsao thinks the goal of the Chairman in bringing the Beijing Modern Dance Company to South America was to combat the stagnate global opinion about China and progress, and to show that not only is progress happening in China, but it is also moving forward rapidly – rapidly enough that China has everything many other modernized countries do.

Rear Light – An example of the latest in modern dance in China

The work Rear Light (2002) is set to Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. What is humorous for western audiences who know the album and lyrics rather well, is that the choreographic husband and wife team of Li Hanzhong and Ma Bo did not pick the music because of the concept of the album, and in fact did not even know what the words on the album meant because they do not speak English (Tsao Q&A). The results of this are lyrics in English that are mismatched to the scene being played out on stage. I feel this was an odd decision for the artistic team to make, especially knowing that *The Wall* is a hallmark of Western pop-culture, as well as having connotations related to paranoia and drug use⁸. The confusion on this subject is then compounded, in my opinion, by the

⁸ The storyline of *The Wall* as is given on the Internet Movie Data Base reads, "The movie tells the story of rock singer "Pink" who is sitting in his hotel room in Los Angeles, burnt out from the music business and only able to perform on stage with the help of drugs. Based on the 1979 double album "The Wall" by Pink Floyd, the film begins in Pink's youth where he is crushed by the love of his mother. Several years later

artistic having chosen to use this piece to take on a world tour to represent modern dance from China, and furthermore Chinese modern dance, which, is purportedly culture-neutral. This purpose is defeated by the use of such a well-known western culture reference, and further strayed because the dancing has little to do with the storyline of the concept-album. According to Tsao, the impetus for choosing this particular album was that the choreographing couple had seen the film version of *The Wall* some ten years prior, and liked its music. As a full-length show, Rear Light was conceived and choreographed in 2002 as a studio project to be shown in front of an audience of approximately 200 in the company's facilities.

How the work made the jump from studio project to touring internationally, was that in the audience of the studio showing was an American presenter. She approached the staff at the Beijing Modern Dance Company saying that American audiences should see this piece because, she said, they would respond well to seeing this contemporary side of China, "rather than the regular ribbon and dragon dances," (Tsao Q&A). The goal of the production was to appeal to a younger generation, and to take the audience through different (albeit vague) contemporary issues of today: think invasion of privacy, losing your identity in a crowd, anonymity, heartbreak, wartime, misconceptions of personality, etc.) The messages the choreographers specifically wanted to convey are germane to all

he is punished by the teachers in school because he is starting to write poems. Slowly he begins to build a wall around himself to be protected from the world outside. The film shows all this in massive and epic pictures until the very end where he tears down the wall and breaks free" (Mayr). Another synopsis from the same source, puts it more succinctly: "The life of the fictional rock star 'Pink' is the subject of the visually evocative cult film based upon the music and visions of the group Pink Floyd as portrayed in the album of the same title. Relationships, drug abuse, sex, childhood, WWII and fascism combine in a disturbing mix of episodic live action and lyrical animation drawn by British caricaturist Gerald Scarfe" (Loh).

societies, not just China (Tsao Q&A). To get to this place with their choreography, Hanzhong and Bo used the rhythms and the tune, emotion and drive of the different pieces of music in order to bring out feelings in themselves. They then assigned emotionally driven situations to them. In order to augment certain portions of the work, sound effects of everyday noises like water running, doors closing and foot steps were added into the score and between the running order of the songs for the show. Many of these effects were taken directly from the sound effects reel of the film version of *The Wall*.

The costuming for the piece was all the same for both genders of the cast members: black pants suits, a white button down shirt, a black tie, and occasionally black trench coats and fedoras were added. Certain pieces in the show had specialty costumes, where the choreographers wanted to show the specific relationship between men and women, or the absurd nature of the people dancing in the “clown scene.” Otherwise, the costuming remained consistent. The intent of the non-flashy costumes is twofold: so as not to try and convey or remind of a certain ethnicity, nor to differentiate between the roles of men and women. This neutrality they felt could best convey the emotion of the pieces, and not make it flashy. It is important because by not assigning any specific characteristics to the dancers – except by giving the audience the dually vague and specific impression of business, power, modernization and commerce by using the suits – the artistic team kept the audience from assigning them values short of being reminiscent of you, or me, or anyone else in a society dominated by business. Even though suits were traditionally associated with Western society, business – the most dominate association with such articles of clothing - has become such a global phenomenon that suits are now

no longer associated with just the West and can be applicable to any modernized society. This generic modern society we see in the piece experiences all the ups and downs in life, (we experience them throughout the length of the work,) and could be almost any culture in the world. This was a conscious choice by the artistic team. In choosing a simple costume, they said that they kept in mind that they wanted it to be one: modern, and two: not culturally specific to China.

The significance that can be assigned to a business suit, it is that it is associated with business. This association naturally leads an audience to attaching the significance of the piece being set in a modern, industrialized, business oriented location. There is a gender identity assigned to business suits, that they are the uniform of business *men*. The artistic team, however, put both men and women in the same attire. This could lead to two conclusions: a commentary on women's role in society, struggling to be recognized as equals, or, the opposite, that men and women are equals and both symbolically (through the use of the suits) display the ideals of a characterized man: powerful, driven, smart and strong. The absence of cultural identity and the use of the suits to confuse gender roles both work to convey a sense of 'anyone' in 'anyplace' in the piece. So, extract from that all that an audience could calculate with out any background knowledge of the company or the piece, what is left is the fact that the overall impression is: in the now and modernized.

This show of modernity also parallels the goals of Beijing Modern Dance Company in general: to bring a forward momentum to modern dance in China, and to not have Chinese modern dance be defined solely by the qualifier 'Chinese.' This is what Willy Tsao spoke of when he questioned, "what exactly is Chinese?" Most non-Chinese

people associate the descriptor "Chinese" with the more traditional Chinese eras: dynasties and emperors. Others' most updated perception of China is that of Mao, communist rule, and strict cultural limitations. It is very perceivable that this work, Rear Light, is completely different from either of these two categories. This is both the goal of the producers, as well as what is taken away from the show by Western audiences.

One of the most significant aspects of where modern dance in China is headed is that it is directly away from everything that could label it, or associate it through content with a specific culture. At the same time that China is rushing towards a very modern, artistically tolerant society, so too is modern dance. During this evolution however, one aspect of the aesthetic of dance that drops out is the part that is most obviously considered "Chinese" to westerners. This more traditional content can be found in modern dance in China, but can some times be viewed as a hindrance. The perception is that often, it appears as a marketing tool to attract foreign audiences to a product: a hybrid of modern and traditional Chinese themes. While this was never the intention of the choreographers who used more blatant "Chinese" aspects (like calligraphy characters, folk dance, long white sleeves in costuming, etc.) the backlash came when "Chinese Modern Dance" came to be defined as modern dance in which Chinese cultural aspects were interwoven. Tsao, and others, think that while the Chinese culture can, and should be inserted upon occasion into modern dance works, that it would limiting if the entire style were to fall into that rut of having one, narrow definition.

Of course, it is impossible to separate a culture from the art it produces, and it would be foolish to claim that no longer do we see influences from Chinese culture in the most recent modern dance pieces coming from China despite the preponderance of

modern. In fact, there are many aspects – subtleties – of traditional Chinese dance that we can see in even the most avant-garde Chinese modern dances. Because the people who produce the art, and choreograph the dances are immersed in the culture they live in, the rather pervasive traditional aesthetic is an inherent part of their movement vocabulary. Therefore, the influence of the traditional is hard to escape from all together. Aside from exact movements, “A lot of values in Chinese traditional art ... are timeless,” (notes the choreographer of the Na-Ni Chen Dance company,) and therefore still influence both performers and choreographers (Galvin 37). The tone and intention of a piece are often derived from the values of those who make and perform the work, and so if the traditional values are timeless and still very much a part of life in China, they will never be truly able to be set apart.

Regardless of the more subtle aspects of traditional Chinese dance that can be found in recent Chinese modern dance, another motive that is very important to note is the intention of the artistic staff of the Beijing Modern Dance Company. Even if traditional values can be seen in small ways in recent works (like Rear Light) the intention of the choreographer was to be modern and not in any sense traditional. This intentionality is a direct reaction to wanting to be seen as modern and “now.” This edge is competitive in nature: not only for modern dance in China, (being competitive in the international dance arena,) but it is also a push to have China be seen as anything other than what it was. China as a whole is rapidly moving towards being the next major global power, and when this kind of ascent is inevitable, the last thing that is desired is an indicator of weakness. Old, backwards, traditional or outdated notions are exactly what a forward moving power wants to display.

In this way, modern dance in China moving to be seen as avant-garde is parallel to China pushing to be seen as a competitive and modern power in the global political community. Modern dance wants to shed the association with the traditional just as China wants to shed the association with out dated political regimes. Couple this with the fact that modern dance was able to rise in China due to the advancement of Chinese society towards being more tolerant of foreign culture and less restrictive of domestic art. Then it is possible to view the arrival of cutting edge modern dance in China as an indicator that China in general has modernized to a comparable extent with the rest of the world, a concept of which many Westerners seems to be rather unaware.

Societal Change

Modern dance is two things the Chinese government has historically been very protective against: Western and expressive. Any study of the emergence of modern dance in China would find modern to be an appropriated art form, taken from Western traditions, however, there is the question as to whether or not having ballet in China played a role in carving out a sphere of acceptance of the notion of Western styles of dance being representative of China as well. The arrival of modern dance was a sudden, abrupt incident, when it was specifically brought over from the U.S. for the purpose of starting modern dance in China. However, knowing that the Chinese government was generally intolerant of Western ideas, would modern have taken hold if not for the previous example of ballet in China having been a successful implantation, and generally a positive addition for China (its arts, the resurfacing of ancient aesthetics, the economy, and otherwise)? Ballet played a significant role in modern dance coming into China

because it foregrounded a tolerance of Western arts and ideas. Though the link between ballet and modern dance was more ruptured than linear, (as we will see was the case in Japan and Korea,) it nevertheless had an influence on the eventual establishment of modern dance as a part of the dance vocabulary in China. Ballet served the purpose of reigniting Chinese society's interest in dance, as well as paved the way for non-Chinese art forms having a place in a very domestic-centric culture.

Dance – any dance, other than folk and minority dancing – in China did not see a resurgence⁹ until the beginning of the 20th century. Even then, dance was still just a part of other parts of life – not yet its own sphere. It wasn't until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that dance in China even could be called its own autonomous art form – boasting schools, students, educators, and performances consisting of only dance (Schmidt, "Dancing" 9). This revival was sparked by ballet, a dance form native to outside of China that was imported by the Soviets. The Soviet ballet technique was codified and gaining much popularity the world over in the early 1900s. Ballet in general is an ethnic dance specific to the West, and was unlike everything related to dance in China. Ballet, which originated from France and Italy, was founded upon many ideals of the Western society and at the time it came to China, the emphasis was being placed on characteristics such as fluidity, light steps and lifted body frame.

⁹ A philosophical school called "Li Xue," started a slope of permanent decline of dance in China, starting about 900 and cumulating in the mid 1800s, when all that remained of the Classical form was a likeness found in the Peking Opera, and even that was limited mostly to acrobatics and fight scenes (Schmidt, "Slumbering" 27).

Ballet in China grew in influence and popularity throughout the 20th century unimpeded¹⁰.

Here, it is important to note that a major resurgence in dance was sparked by ballet, a western dance form. This does two things: it helps to strip away the notion that Western art might be harmful to China, and it also incites and re-establishes a dance culture in China. It is unlikely that had ballet not come into China, modern dance would have stood a chance in China.

¹⁰ Because it had experienced such a steep decline, dance in China was not found on a widespread basis, nor was it being practiced or well known to the average Chinese person. Dance did not make a comeback into China until the Soviets brought in Ballet as they fled the 1917 Revolution in the USSR. As ballet grew in influence, aesthetics of Classical Chinese dance was paired with the new form, and reincarnation of "Classical Chinese dance" was produced. This (new) Classical Chinese dance that is now seen on stage is an amalgamation of what is still around from the old Chinese Operas, the folk and minority dances, and western ballets; this new classical Chinese dance is therefore a fairly young style, even though it truly calls upon tradition and elements from the dynastic ages. The (new) Classical Chinese dance arts that started gaining limited popularity in China, experienced a large surge in popularity after the emergence of staged more Western-style ballet performances and visits from Western dancers like Margot Fonteyn, Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova (who all came and danced in China in the coastal cities (Ou 30). The push in Classical dance was a reaction to compete with a foreign style of dance that was gaining popularity and influence. There was no animosity, just a reawakening of an aesthetic that had been neglected, and whose merits and role could now be more clearly imagined and delineated.

With the re-emergence of Classical Chinese dance as well as the establishment of Ballet in China, China suddenly had a dance facet to its artistic society. These forms of dance remained active in China throughout 19th century, as well as the 20th century. Ballet and Classic Chinese dance even survived the fall of the dynastic system, and the rebuilding of China, and the eventual settle into a Chinese communist system. While they remained in existence, they didn't, however, have much forward momentum during these years because of the formative nature of the politics and the restrictions that were eventually placed on the arts during the revolutionary years and the communist rule of China. In fact, we don't see notable growth in these art forms until after the end of the Cultural Revolution (which lasted from 1966 until 1976, and was partially characterized by the strictest limitations on the arts to date.) At that time, the strictness of the Chinese government towards the arts lessened, and both Ballet and Classical dance were allowed more freedom in China. This is also the time when we see modern dance first appear in China.

Aside from the role ballet played in the emergence of modern dance in china, what evidence is there to help prove that the emergence of modern dance in China was specifically hindered and then triggered by the nature and tolerance of the society and restrictive form of government in China? To begin exploring this question let's first look at why it is that modern dance was 'kept out' of China until after the Cultural Revolution. The key to remember is expression: modern dance was always about expression, rebellion, a voice and a driving pulse to move forward, move ahead. Or as Foulkes describes it, "Modern dance began and remains a place where people on the edges of society congregate and express themselves," (5). This might seem a little dangerous --or more likely irresponsible--for a country that at the time mostly concerned with national unity and the rise of the proletariat. Those in charge saw no need for expression needed, unless it was to promote the message and cause of the communist party. To this end, when the People's Republic of China was formed in 1949, it was decided that any academy that taught the arts must be overseen by the Ministry of Culture for the sole purpose of making sure that artists were loyal to the party only and not their own voice ("Academies").

Ballet can be seen as having helped the emergence of modern dance into China because it helped make society and the government more accepting of western styles of dance, it reinvigorated a defunct part of Chinese art, and it was the cause for the establishment for dance schools and a framework of dance in Chinese society once again. However, even with this help, the dominating hindrances working against modern dance in China, social tolerance and governmental intervention eclipsed the influence of ballet

as an asset to modern dance's emergence until the social structure changed when the government changed its policies after the Cultural Revolution.

Just as modern dance was an attempt to be entirely different from classical ballet, when modern arrived in China it was a complete departure from all dance that had existed there previously. Even though modern dance had been around for about a century before it ever moved into China, it never made it to the mainland. The main reason why is because it is an art form that is associated almost entirely with the West. Western ideas and culture were not welcomed in China, or even tolerated, during the majority of the time in which, logically, modern dance could have been making an entrance into China. Had it not been for the "closed gates" that kept western ideas from China throughout Mao Zedong's rule, we could assume that China would have probably seen modern dance much earlier, probably in the 1940's and 50's... about the same time we see Butoh in Japan and modern dance in Korea.

Summarizing the main point for why modern dance is thought to not have been seen in China earlier than it was, was because the government interfered, knowingly against expression through art, though not specifically targeted against modern dance. The reasons being that art, and especially experimental arts, like modern dance could create an atmosphere that would be ideal for rebellion and freedom of expression. Additionally, and even more importantly, were China's policies on the West. This gives us another reason besides art being a form of expression for why modern dance was kept out: modern dance being from Western origins. While this all logically follows, what is to say that this wasn't just the way things happened in China? Perhaps the timing of the development of modern dance was not dictated by the changes that happened

concurrently in the governmental policies and changes in society? Maybe the development of modern dance in China lagged behind the rest of the developed world simply by chance?

The counter argument to this would be that modern dance is not exclusive to China. In fact, Japan and Korea, two other geographically close, culturally similar, but vastly politically different nations from China have related histories. The development of modern dance in Japan and Korea were each tied to the political climate and social limitations. We see, in these cases, that a more liberal, expressive society fosters art and creation, and that oppressive regimes, hinder art. This can then be applied to China as it changes from more oppressed to more modern, and its arts go from non-existent to emerging. Both Japan and Korea have very rich cultural pasts like China did, and were not considered Westernized when we see the emergence of modern dance. Additionally, I chose these examples specifically for their geographical proximity to China, as well as the more readily available information on dance that is possible for both Japan and Korea. Therefore both countries serve as good parallels, (though not the only examples that could be made for the same argument,) which point out that government and society dictate the level of flourish of the arts in a given country.

First, the case of Japan, whose democratic style government after World War II ideally fostered a society of free speech that catalyzed the arts. After the fall of the dynastic system in Japan, the immediate consensus was a push towards modernization in order to keep up with and eventually compete with growing Western Imperialist powers. The Japanese view at the time was to push for modernization so they could then take the technology and subsequently double back and strike the imperialists with their own

technology. For all intents and purposes, since the imperialist powers that Japan was looking to follow in suit of to modernize were Western, (the logical course of action for Japan to take was to more or less Westernize themselves.) Additionally, during this leap towards modernity in Japan, the one thing that was noticeably neglected (some would say purposefully shunned) was traditional arts. Couple that with the inevitable appearance of Western culture into Japan during this move towards modernization/westernization, and the it is evident how Japanese society was ripe to receive new art, especially from the West.

The facet of this that I focus on for the purpose of this thesis is, of course, modern dance. Modern dance came into Japan, along with ballet for the first time about 1912, when a renowned instructor in theatrics, choreography and dance, Giovanni Vitorrio Rossi, a noted ballet teacher, with some experience in modern dance, was invited to the newly completed Imperial Palace (Kuniyoshi). He stayed for only a few years, and when he left mostly the dance left with him, and his students stopped dancing. Of a handful of exceptions was one in particular that bears note: two of Rossi's students, Baku Ishii and Masao and Seiko Takada, kept dancing, but instead of ballet, they did modern. From there modern dance grew in popularity and practice, and up until the second World War it was modern dance that spread most rapidly and influentially. Western dance in Japan (either ballet or modern) is called "yobu," but, by WWII, modern had become so predominant that when anyone spoke of western dance it was understood that they meant modern dance, not ballet (Kuniyoshi). After a post-war tapering off, Martha Graham – perhaps the most famous of the American modern dance pioneers – brought her dance troupe to Japan in the mid 1950s. This was enormously influential and had such an

impact that American modern dance has been the dominate influence ever since, and cemented modern dance's place in Japan (Kuniyoshi).

From just after World War II, modern dance in Japan then spawned a whole sub-division of modern dance unique to Japan and Japanese culture. This is called Butoh. Butoh can be defined as "a physical expression born out of 'Ankoku butoh (Dance of Darkness),' " (Suzuki). Butoh emerged in Japan after WWII and was started by a visionary named Tatsumi Hijikata. Hijikata started choreographing his own pieces of dance around 1950, but Butoh didn't become prominent until the 1970s. Hijikata was very rebellious with his dance, and he purposely incorporated "socially taboo themes of sex and violence" into his work, "presenting a so-called 'rebellion of the human body,' breaking the control of modern reasoning and constantly creating scandals" (Suzuki). Hijikata wanted to show the negative side of human beings, and show the body as an entity that "owns its own time and space" because "Hijikata felt that the physical body demanded a new expression that did not exist before on stage" (Suzuki). Famously, the style of butoh would go on to even reenact atomic bomb victim's reaction to the blast and the radiation.

Knowing all this about modern dance's entry into Japan, let us now compare it with the situation in China. Not only was Japan open to western ideas far earlier – encouraged and not prohibited by their government to do so – but experimentation and rebellion were also not being overtly oppressed for nearly a hundred years sooner than in China. If Hijiyaka had tried to introduce socially taboo subjects in Chinese society, he would have been mercilessly persecuted, up until present day even. Japan and China both were introduced to Ballet about the same time, in the 1910s. It is not unreasonable to say

that, had the Chinese government and their policies not posed such a strict barrier that both countries would have followed the exact same route to modern dance on parallel timelines. Additionally, it is not at all outlandish to propose that, the government in China (the most pervasive and obvious difference between the two countries,) was the retarding factor for modern dance coming to China. One variable that is rather debatable is whether modern dance came into China once it modernized – technically and socially – or whether modern dance was more of a hallmark of experimentation and freedom in Chinese society instead. Either way, Japan, being a country with a democratic style government which values expression instead of prohibiting it like China's government did, had a flourishing and groundbreaking modern dance scene and artistic community.

The history of the series of events that led to modern dance coming to Korea is contingent on what transpired in Japan's history with modern dance. This is because modern dance came to Korea via the Japanese, during their colonization of Korea that lasted from about 1910 to 1945. From its introduction into Korea, modern dance was further by the works of Mary Wigman (a German-born modern dance pioneer) and Baku Ishii (mentioned earlier as one of the two students who stemmed off from Rossi work pioneering modern dance in Japan.) Korean modern dance artists from the this era were experimenting with creating their own dance values and choreography by incorporating Western dance techniques that they had learned from the Japanese and the spiritual motifs found in the traditional dances of Korea ("Modern").

From this successful beginning, modern dance in Korea grew. The ensuing generation of modern dancers in Korea developed the assimilation further of Western/Japanese aspects of modern dance aesthetic with traditional Korean folk dances

and emerged with a number of characteristics of dance that are considered specific to Korean modern dance. One such example is the three-stage stepping technique that combines the Western technique's demi-pointe and pirouettes, and the traditional Korean technique's two-stage stepping technique (which goes from heel to toe, heel to toe) ("Modern").

When national liberation from Japan occurred in 1945, Korea split into two territorial divisions: North and South. South Korea went on to establish a democratic regime under the title The Republic of Korea. North Korea however, became a communist regime under the name The Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("Korea's"). What is telling here, is that within Korea's two halves we can view a smaller scale parallel to China vs. Japan or the West in terms of the acceptance and growth of modern dance.

Korea's history of falling victim to imperialist colonizers motivated the reaction by the North Korean government once they split off from South Korea to want to preserve its version of Korean culture – because for along while they had had another country dominating their culture. This would include, especially, most traditional aspects: food, dress, art, architecture, and folk dance and song ("Contemporary"). This permeating ideology is called "Juche" – which is Korean for "self-reliance," and it is the official government-sponsored ideology of North Korea. This ideology "asserts Korea's cultural distinctiveness and creativity as well as the productive powers of the working masses. The ways in which Juche rhetoric is used shows a razor-thin distinction between revolutionary themes of self-sufficient socialist construction and a virulent ethnocentrism. In the eyes of North Korea's leaders, the "occupation" of the southern half of the

peninsula by "foreign imperialists" lends special urgency to the issue of cultural-ethnic identity" ("Korea's").

Understanding this, it is not surprising to then learn that in communist North Korea the role of literature and art is primarily for heralding the Juche and communist ideologies (and the need for revolution and reunification of the Korean Peninsula). North Korean art mainly visits past glory and stays away from anything that might be considered reactionary and rebellious ("Modern"). Generally the majority of dance in North Korea is specifically folk dance, keeping in the same vein of maintaining and perpetuating Korean culture. This is not to say that modern does not exist or that there is no awareness of it in North Korea, but it is a dismal projection for modern dance there. Compare this with South Korea, who became an open-cultured, democratic society. Traditional culture is a definite part of South Korean culture, but the new and modern is not ignored in favor of preserving the traditional, like we see happening in North Korea. Therefore, modern dance has fared much better in South Korea, where the line of history continued from where it severed for North Korea during the national liberation.

With the case of Korea (and the resulting cases of North and South Korea) we can clearly see again how a politically imposed policy and ideology exactly dictated the growth of art in the Koreas. Modern dance's history here is specifically telling simply because of the sharp contrast when it was thriving throughout both areas that would become the two Koreas before the national liberation, and that after it dropped off steeply under the half that had the strangle hold on cultural mandates. This should be no surprise that culture, politics and society delineate the success and fostering of art. The United

States with free speech and low to no government interference in the creative process is a key example of this as well.

So, having examined the strength of the correlation between governmental regime type and level of interference in the arts, we can turn to China in the modern day and ask the question – what does the fact that modern dance has come into China now say about the current political state in China? How far into becoming westernized is China? Or is it more that this is a modernization? Or, is it both?

Concluding Thoughts

The fact that modern dance is now a part of Chinese culture heralds the arrival of a modern China. Modern dance is an avant-garde art form found mostly in industrialized, modernized societies that tolerates expression, experimentation and radicalism. This is not to say that modern dance is the cause of this level of modernization, nor that it is the sole earmark of such a culture, but more to assert that it is one means to which we can judge the degree of advancement in modernization. It would be possible for a country to claim sweeping changes in society, but quite another to provide unbiased, unrelated proof. Modern dance –though not quite yet thriving in China – is one such indicator.

The Western (or chronological) model of change suggests that all societies will eventually fall into the same evolution, emerging with traits, values and ideologies similar to those held by western countries who are already considered modern. China debunks this paradigm of advancement, and while edging slightly more towards Capitalism, they have achieved a certain level of modernity under a communist regime. The style that modern dance entered China parallels the ruptured and divergent style of

progress and evolution characteristic to China in recent decades. Modern dance came to China as an import, not as an emergence from ballet like other countries. China is using a more conservative and interventionist regime than other countries in its realization of modernity, but nonetheless has achieved success. China has the potential to produce a style of modern dance that is both based on its unique culture, and a reaction against it.

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Moving to a City Assignment

Melinda Ritchie
DANC 461 - Senior Thesis
Spring Semester, 2005

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Partner Aesthetic Assessment

Melinda Ritchie

DANC 461 – Sr. Thesis

Spring Semester, 2005

Sarah Romanowsky's Aesthetic

Having been in the pieces which Sarah has choreographed for the past two year's student dance concerts, I feel like I have a firm grasp on Sarah's aesthetic, even without having interviewed her. While I was correct in my assumptions, what I could not ascertain just from being privy to the process, were the internal motivations which move Sarah, and which drive her intentions based on what she does and does not value – in life and up on stage.

The things I would venture are important to Sarah's aesthetic are all the things that I see as reoccurring themes in her choreography. Foremost, I could tell immediately that she valued a sense of fun and play in her movement vocabulary and choices on theme. Hand in hand with this, I could identify a tendency to use non-linear storylines in choreography – meaning that she often uses settings or situations that are theatrical and drive a dance – but she does not go for an unfolding of events to tell a progression. This is evident in her latest dance, "Trip Away," which was based on Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, but borrowed only the presence and setting of fairies for her dance to accompany lyrics which were taken from the play's epilogue, and not the narrative.

Themes – narrow and broad – are often a part of Sarah's work. One factor that I find pleasing as a dancer and an audience member when watching Sarah's aesthetic is her use of fusion. She mixes with ease jazz and balletic content, middle-eastern and hip-hop, lyrical and musical. Sarah's aesthetic is one which is rarely confined to one style of dance for a given piece of choreography. This is why often she chooses to incorporate dramatic elements, to add more to a dance than just movement.

Sarah herself says that she prefers to keep her pieces upbeat and lively. This is a conscious decision to keep her aesthetic within a set of restraints to which she herself is attracted. This pertains only to what she creates, and is a reaction to trying to keep her work distinct from work which can come close to becoming over done and sallow in its content (my opinion, not hers.) Sarah mentioned that what she is not attracted to in the aesthetics of others when pieces fail to convey a real human quality. This humanness, she says, is necessary, otherwise dances come off as empty and expressionless. It is from this comment that I purport that perhaps the reason she tends to make upbeat, fun and engaging dances, is that there is more often a glowing, engaging human quality to these pieces, because the audience can more easily and readily connect with them.

In this vein, Sarah mentioned that she thinks that there is value in subtlety. This means to her that there is a delineation between sexuality and sensuality, the latter being the more preferred in her aesthetic because it carries less of a tendency to be over the top and only for show – which means it would have lost its humanness. This leads me to the assertion that everything about Sarah's aesthetic is born from that which organic to Sarah – in her personality, and in her feeling on the humanity in dance.

She says: "I am most attracted to art that comes from an artist that has lived life and has had experiences. You can tell the difference between an artist who has lived their life in the studio, and an artist who has lived their life – and then brought it to the studio." This reflection summarizes Sarah's aesthetic perfectly: she wants her work to convey that well-rounded sense of being of a fully lived life, and all of her artistic decisions go into transferring that sense into movement and onto the stage.